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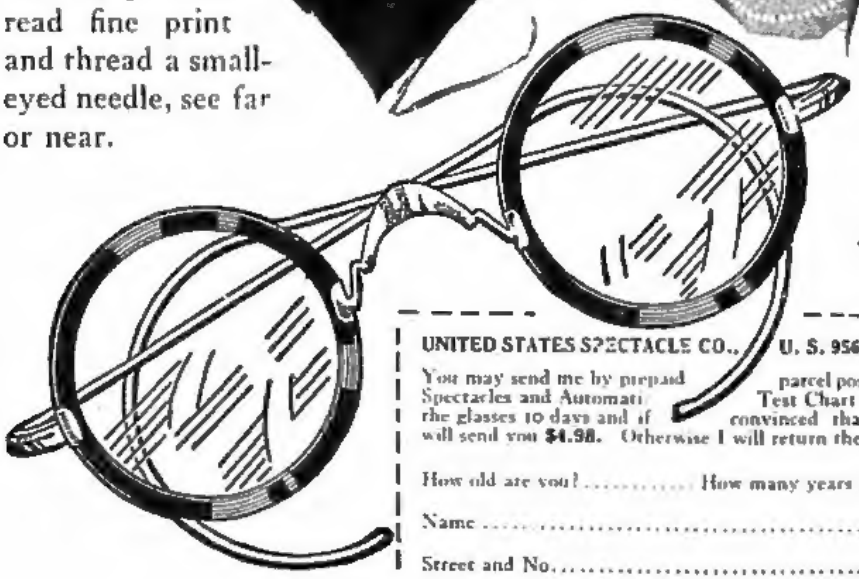

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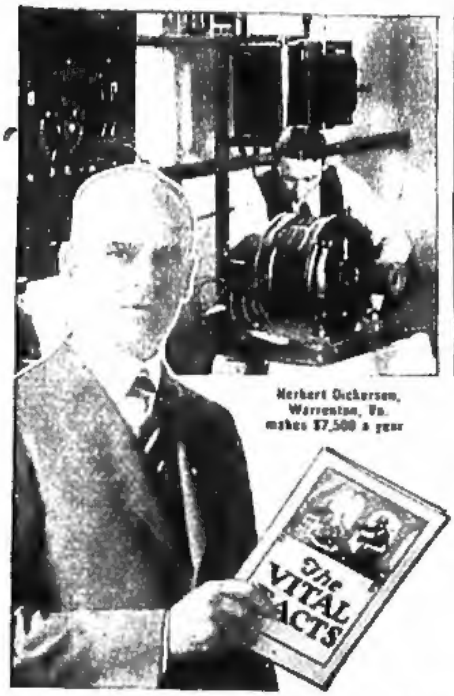

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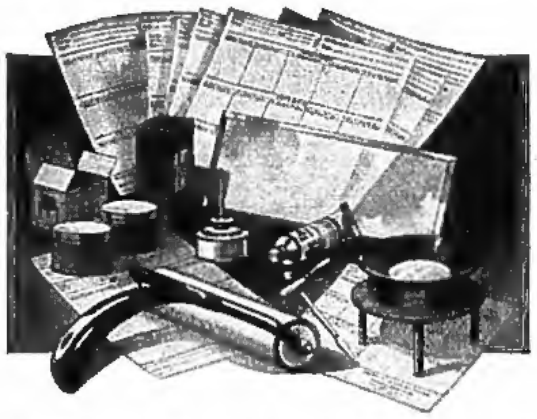

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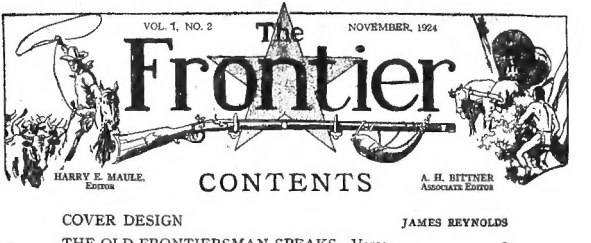

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Where everyone is invited to have his say

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The Frontier

for

DECEMBER

THE VALLEY OF STRIFE — A complete Novel

Marshall R. Hall

A tale of the cattle days when Arizona was a territory—packed with action

THE VANISHING SPOOR — A Novelette

L. Patrick Greene

On the Rhodesian frontier Trooper Stevens finds a mystery

THE TRAIL OF DOOM — A Novelette

Eugene Cunningham

When Crabb's men tried to extend the American frontier into Sonora

YELLOW POISON — *Robert Terry Shannon*

Gold!—as powerful a lure in frontier days as now

CRACKING THE BLACK JOKE *James K. Waterman*

The Sea Fox tries his hand at humor—and whaling

THE JUNGLE CONVERT — *Oscar Schisgall*

The South American frontier—far from civilization

LAND HUNGRY — *Barry Scobee*

A homestead—and two homesteaders

MIN AND THE KIDS — *Albert William Stone*

The law of the range still lives

PIONEERS, O PIONEERS! — *Michael Williams*

They carried the frontier westward, these Kentucky hunters

AND OTHERS

Ready For You on December 20th

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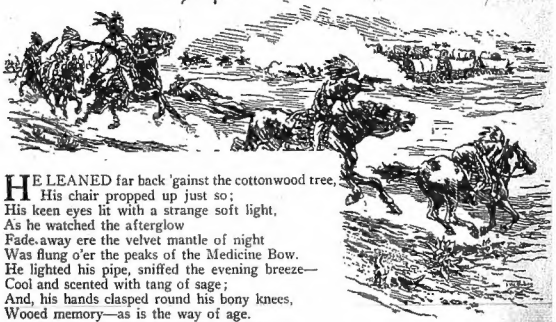
The Old Frontiersman Speaks

By Ralph Barclay Barney



HE LEANED far back 'gainst the cottonwood tree,
His chair propped up just so;
His keen eyes lit with a strange soft light,
As he watched the afterglow
Fade away ere the velvet mantle of night
Was flung o'er the peaks of the Medicine Bow.
He lighted his pipe, sniffed the evening breeze—
Cool and scented with tang of sage;
And, his hands clasped round his bony knees,
Wooed memory—as is the way of age.
And these are the thoughts that he gave to me
As he talked that night 'neath the cottonwood tree

"So they say the last frontier is gone? Well, that may be so.
Somehow I can hardly believe it; some way I jest dunno.
Why, it seems but jest a little while ago, as I look back
An' shut my eyes! I can see again the dusty, deep worn track
A-leadin' out from old Fort Kearney, lyin' off the Platte
Three mile or so; that was the frontier where I was at.

I had a job a-whackin' bulls on Jim Evens's wagon train
That run 'tween there an' Julesburg, acrost a sun-parched plain
That didn't blossom jest exactly like a bloomin' rose—
Why I seen days so scorchin' hot you'd blister through your clo'es;
An' the ox teams, caked with sweat an' dust, swung 'long in a ploddin' walk
That nuthin' 'ud break, no matter how you'd crack your whip or talk.

But no, I'm wrong, there was somethin' that 'ud usually break it, too,
An' that was when we'd have a call from the Pawnees or the Sioux,
Or some of the stinkin' Arapahoes that once in a while come through.
At times like them those pore dumb brutes 'peared to know just what to do,
An', with their tongues a-stickin' out, most desperate in their stride,
They'd yank the wagons into a ring so's we could fight inside.

An' then, at last, the railroad come, an' people got too thick;
Why, you couldn't ride over thirty mile 'thout seein' some pore hick
A-settin' out there in the buffalo grass, bettin' with Uncle Sam
That him an' his family wouldn't starve 'fore he got a deed to the land!
But me, I wasn't no bettin' man, not with the odds so dear,
An' so I pulls my freight an' starts on a hunt for a new frontier.

Up on the Gallatin River I goes, punchin' cows there for a spell,
An' I liked it good an' was satisfied, 'til the folks there 'gun to yell
'Bout gettin' the country settled up, an' they starts a-comin' in
In wagons, afoot and on hossback; I tell you it was a sin
The way they ruined that valley—plows a-rippin' up the grass,
Pollutin' God's country with onions, an' wheat, an' garden sass!

One day I got up an' moved on again, a little bit fu'ther west—
They'd run me into the timber now, an' I felt like I needed rest.
It was cool an' sweet an' pretty there, an' I vows I'll end my days
Where the wind sung songs in the pine trees. Then starts the lumberin' craze
An' they come hell-bent from the ends of the earth, almos' a million or more,
So I packs all my housekeepin' onto my back an' nails up the ol' cabin door.

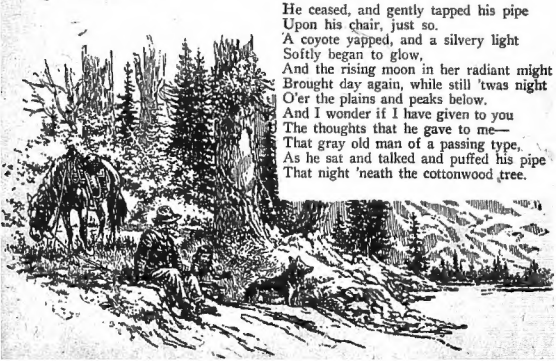
It was now gettin' on in the nineties, an' this time I swore that I'd roam
So far that I'd shake 'em forever; an' I lands on the beach up to Nome.
But I hadn't been there but a week or ten days, shiverin' an' shakin' with cold,
When here come the whole frothin' pack at my heels, grabbin' an' grubbin' for gold.
I shore was a-gettin' disgusted, an' my shoulders was gettin' some bowed
With the weight of the problem I carried, of keepin' ahead of the crowd.

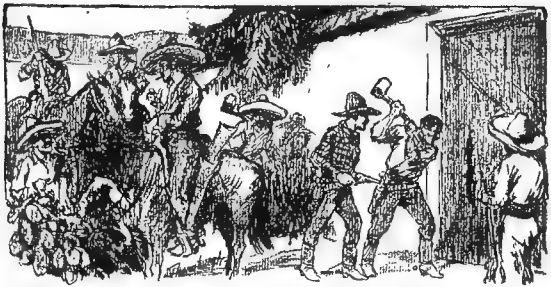
But I always has been a gritty ol' cuss, so I thinks I'll just shove along
An' try 'er once more; an' this time I goes a thousand miles up the Yukon.
An' my pardner an' me had the scurvy—for spuds was a dollar a throw—
But he stuck to me, an' I stuck to him, an' we bucked the cold an' the snow
'Til at last we got clear up to Dawson; and there I found out the worst—
Settin' there in the snow was a city; the houn' pack had gotten there first!

Well, I knows at last that my hand is called—I'm gettin' too old an' slow;
An' 'sides that the supply of new frontiers was a-runnin' sorter low.
They'd kep' me so busy a-movin' I hadn't had no time to spare
For pilin' up money; all that I'd wanted was plenty of room an' air.
But when fellers talk 'bout the 'wide frontier,' I swells up some with pride,
For I knows if it hadn't o' been for me, she wouldn't o' been so wide!

An' so I come back to Wyoming—" his voice had grown wistful and low—
"Back to this spot that I allus liked best, at the foot o' the Medicine Bow.
I shore likes it here in the evenin's, out where I can smell o' the sage,
An' turn back an' live the years over again—for that's the reward o' old age;
But if may not be long 'fore I'll be movin' on to another frontier new and strange,
An' I wonders sometimes if they'll crowd me out there, on that last frontier
over the range."

He ceased, and gently tapped his pipe
Upon his chair, just so.
A coyote yapped, and a silvery light
Softly began to glow,
And the rising moon in her radiant might
Brought day again, while still 'twas night
O'er the plains and peaks below.
And I wonder if I have given to you
The thoughts that he gave to me—
That gray old man of a passing type,
As he sat and talked and puffed his pipe
That night 'neath the cottonwood tree.





THE BORDER BUCCANEERS

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF OUR MODERN FRONTIER—AND AS ROARING A STRIP AS IN OLDER DAYS

By REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

A name to conjure with along the Mexican border was that of Simon Zaldumbide, sinister director of the Eagle and Serpent Benevolent Association—that gang of cutthroat thieves who preyed upon the sun-parched lands of America's Southern frontier

TRAGEDY and comedy are mixed in this salad we call life. A man's killed at one corner; the next door they're showing the latest slap-stick release, and across the street somebody's making or dropping a fortune, or winning or losing a wife. What I've got to tell begins like a farce and ends like—well, wait and see.

When I crossed the border at Oreja, coming back to God's Country, and my own, where the old Matanza Trail changes into Rogers' Road, I was still the same Matthew Satterlee I'd always known, a man of peace and prunes. From the crest of Quesada, I looked over the strip of country northward—all new to my experience—without seeing a sign of what really lay ahead of me, and yet I can remember that commonplace landscape as plainly as I can remember my grammar school. Why? Because the way through it turned out to be a way cut through theft and poison, gunplay and gun-earnest, attempted murder and murder pulled off too successfully. It was inside the first fifty miles of Rogers' Road that I met Ben Tuck, and the Pedlar and Simon Zaldumbide.

Unless you call fighting in France a vacation, this was about the only one I'd had in my life. I was born at Seattle just before the big fire; my folks died when I was a kid, and I sold newspapers outside the King Street Station, went to nightschool and worked my way through the State University, studying agriculture and agricultural chemistry; that was hard work. Then I headed into the fruit-lands, got hold of a rundown pruna ranch for one note and two mortgages and started to catch up; and that didn't give me much time for seeing America first. Time? There aren't many things take less than getting married, nor many that men give less thought to; but I've always been the slow sort and I couldn't even spare leisure for a wedding. So I kept right on till I'd paid off those loans, and then till I'd banked enough clear profits to know I wasn't anybody's man except Matt Satterlee's.

It was last summer before I'd earned a trip. I went down the coast by train; took a boat to Mazatlan, which is the worst port in Mexico, and trained it again to

Hermosillo. There I bought me a grouchy mustang and struck northwest. I figured to ride back to Puget Sound inland; I knew I'd see some interesting country, and maybe I thought there might be a chance of meeting up with a nice girl who wouldn't mind sharing my prune ranch.

There I was on Quasada, where the first trail from the west stops at Rogers' Road, and there was a hard-baked brown country rolling ahead of me like a table full of loaves of bread that had been in the oven five minutes too long. Not a human being in sight at first and nothing made by human hands but the road and a contraption so queer that it didn't seem any human being could be responsible for it.

"Oh, Bessy's on her way,
For her tires have hit the track;
She can do a mile a day—
If there's nothing holding back!"

A rich tenor voice was singing from underneath that crazy contrivance, and the contrivance was a motionless auto.

It was the weirdest auto I ever clapped eyes on. It might have been the forward half of a solitaire motor-boat, with a zinc hull, mounted on bicycle-wheels. No wonder my horse shied when he came up to it.

"Can't you hear the cheerful chug—
Can't you feel the scorching breath—
Can't you see the heave and lug
Of my tin Elizabeth?"

I couldn't, for the thing was dead beat. However, a hammer worked underneath, marking time to the song, and out of my side a crop of brick-red curly hair was poked.

"Want any help?" I asked.

The young fellow jumped from his hole like a jackrabbit. He was short and plump with red-brown eyes; he had a smiling mouth, but a square jaw. He wore riding-clothes, but sported a celluloid collar and, hot as the day was, he had on a Gordon plaid vest held together by horn buttons. He dropped his hammer, wiped his hands on some waste and stuck an oily finger so close to my mouth that I could have bitten it.

"*I* want to help *you*," he said. "Insured?"

I admitted I wasn't.

"Ride a horse and not insured! Know the story 'bout the Englishman? San Diego. Asked if we didn't have lower classes here. Told him yes. Asked what they did. Told him they didn't own autos. Horse-riding's dangerous trade. Going to insure you. That's only practical."

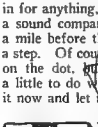
It was hard not to answer his smile with another. "You're an insurance salesman?"

"Supersalesman," he corrected. "Only two sorts of people in this world, buyers and sellers. I belong to the sellers. Sell insurance—sell anything."

"But I don't know whether I want insurance," I said, though as a matter of fact I'd been thinking about an endowment policy for a good while.

"'Member the man with a double suit-case in 'Frisco? Boy said he'd carry it for two-bits. Man said he didn't want it carried. Boy asked him, 'If you don't want it carried, why are you carrying it?' Any man rides a horse's asking for insurance."

Well, I may as well admit right now that he did insure me. I'm not quick to go in for anything, but this fellow represented a sound company and could throw people a mile before they'd lifted a foot to walk a step. Of course, he didn't hook me quite on the dot, but the transaction has only a little to do with what followed, so I tell it now and let it go at that.



IS office was this hand-sewed auto, and his home was wherever it stopped.

He lent money that he borrowed for that purpose; he was a sort of free-lance agent for all sorts of firms from the harvester trust to mouth-organ makers, and when he couldn't pack samples he carried photographs.

"Name's Ben Tuck. Home office calls me 'Gunshot Ben.' This is my territory, and when my prospects fill in blanks 'bout what their ancestors died of they mostly write down 'Gunshot wounds.' 'Course you needn't pay a cent now. Examined first. I'll just get up this application."

He was in the middle of it already. I wondered was there an examining physician in the next town.

"Dedo del Pie?" It means a toe, but he pronounced it like the desert your mother used to make. "Kill or cure there—doctor'd starve. No business for me; all bad risks. Hasn't been a funeral of a man over forty since the vital statistics were started at Equality, fifty miles ahead. I pass the Pie. Like what the fellow said 'bout Texas: 'f I owned Dedo and hell, I'd rent Dedo and live in t'other. If you call a Dedo man a good citizen, he'll shoot you first and then sue for libel. I'm cir-

cling it—east to Pompey. That's practical."

I said then we mightn't meet again, but he didn't think so. Headed north, I'd have to put up somewhere next night between Dedo and Equality, the county seat, and the only place was five miles off the main road, the Ranch of the Roses, where Ben probably would bring up about the same time on his way back west. A fool Spanish name for nothing but bare acres and a salt pool, he thought it, and said the land used to belong to a Mexican called Martinez

"Heard at the Equality bank t'other day a San Diego man, Aritas Allen, was kind of camping there for a week or so. Bought it two years ago. Found out he used to carry $100,000 with us and gave it up. Seventy-one, but smelly rich. Sounds good for a form of short-term annuity I've invented. Now—case of death, who's your beneficiary?"

I hadn't thought about that.

"Why," I said, "my wife, I reckon."

"Name?" Ben shot back.

"I—I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"Not yet," I said. I could feel myself blushing.

"Shake!" said Ben. We were friends from that minute; you never had to explain delicate matters to Ben Tuck. "Only you'll have to get her cut out and roped before this policy goes through; that's only practical."

He had the application fixed by now and was going on with the fixing of his car, but just before he ducked his red top he said one thing more, and said it in a voice hardly like the big one common to him.

"If you'd rather bunk in Dedo than in the middle of the road, why walk pussy. The town's filling up with a lot of Simon Zaldumbide's gang from over the border."

He was surprised I'd never heard of Zaldumbide.

"Then, he advised, "thing for you to do's to keep on out of earshot in future."

"But you talk as if he was the devil," I protested.

"Well," said Ben, "that's practical." He dropped under his crazy car and I heard his loud tenor:

"Now, Bessy, don't you stall,
For we've got life's race to win,
And my wad I've bet it all
On my filly Lizzy Tin."

That was the end of my one-reel comic.

I rode on for five miles, down the dip and up Hennessey's Hill, where the first east trail branches off. Below me the second trail from the west joined up to Rogers' Road, and ahead of that, in among the burned bread-loaves, I could see a clutter of adobe wall that I knew must be El Dedo del Pie. There was a little blue smoke curling lazily up from the town, not enough wind to fan it. A borax mule-train was creeping in, as lazy as that smoke, and along the road from the west I saw two horsemen coming. They weren't together, and both were walking their mounts, but the rear fellow was gaining a bit on the other.

I don't know why I watched them; I just did—and it just happened that neither of them looked up and saw me, for I was clear at first against the afternoon sky and pretty soon directly above them. Except for the mule-train on the main trail and near the town, they were the only living group to look at, and involuntarily I reined in.

The man at the rear called out, and the one ahead turned 'round. I could see he was an American, whereas the fellow coming up wore the comical hat of a Mexican and sat his mustang to suit.

Where Rogers' Road crosses Hennessey's Hill, the hill itself falls straight away, and even the road runs out mighty steep to West Trail Corners. There I was, perhaps a bit drawn back to that pile of rock just one side of the crest when Mexican came abreast of American—right, as you might say, under me. The Mexican asked a question, probably about what turn to take at the crossroads; the American shook his head that he was uncertain. The pair were so close now that even some of the American's words come right up to me.

"—— a stranger here myself."

I heard that, and something about roses. They were the last words the man ever said.

The Mexican's bridle was in his left hand, and he was on the other fellow's off-side. With that American's eyes right on his own, the Mexican whipped something out of his belt. I saw his free hand shoot up with the flash of a knife in it, and I saw it come down straight.

The American dropped his bridle-hold, fell forward, pitched sidewise, then crumbled to the road.

Like a shot, the stabber was after him. He was going through his victim's clothes.

I was as quick as anybody could be who was as startled as I was. Fact is, I was too quick. I dug my spurs, and my mus-

tang went to his knees. I packed a gun, and I'm a good shot; but prune-ranching doesn't train you for quick revolver-play, and I have to confess I didn't remember my weapon. By the time my mount was up again and on his way, the Mexican had heard me, finished his robbery and was remounting.

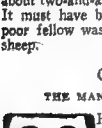
I must have yelled as I came forward. Anyhow, I had a good look at the knife-man's face and even then wondered if he was Mexican, after all. He was dark, but rather burned dark than born that way. He hadn't any mustache, and from one corner of his mouth up toward an ear ran a ragged scar, all dirty white. That and his nose would have identified him anywhere—his nose was so little, and what there was of it was so flat that you might be excused for saying he hadn't any at all. He looked like an angry ape.

I say I saw these things about him, but of course I didn't rightly realize them. He was in the saddle and tearing off before I reached the place of the attack. I didn't even clearly see which turning he took at the crossroads, for I'd slung my bridle free, and my mustang came up so short in front of the American that it all but sent me overhead.

The next second I was down and stooping beside the body. A knife had gone straight down between the shoulder-bones, about two-and-a-half inches from the neck. It must have been a long knife, for the poor fellow was as dead as a slaughtered sheep.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN THAT FIRED FIRST



THE Washington fruit country isn't the homeland of the League to Enforce Peace, but it isn't Saturday night on Broadway, either. I wasn't used to murder.

Except during five weeks in the trenches north of Verdun and the show at Montfaucon, I'd only seen sudden death twice before this. One time was a regular gun-killing when a lumberjack went looking for it along Seattle harbor, and the other was an auto smash-up in front of my own land; but I was just a kid when the first happened, and it was almost a legal execution, whereas the second was plain accident. Here was new stuff, and mighty ugly. The sight of this dead man's face—it was exactly like the face of a frightened child—made me plain sick.

At last I had my gun drawn. But what was the good of that? Not a soul in sight. I didn't even know which way the murderer had gone. I thought I remembered his turning north toward El Dedo del Pie, right here in American territory, but south for Oreja and the border was most likely, and I couldn't be sure, anyhow. All I could do was to beat it for Dedo myself and notify the authorities.

I tried that, and you can guess I moved some. I knocked over a Chinaman on the town's outskirts and thought he was dead, too, but he got up before I could get off, and stood looking at me without blinking.

"Muchie click," he said, meaning I seemed in a hurry.

"Where do I find the police?" I asked.

"No sabbie," he smiles. No p'lice Dedo. Dedo no likee p'lice, so p'lice no likee Dedo."

"Well then, the sheriff?"

The Chink jerked his head over his shoulder. "Schleff live in 'Quality. No comee Dedo. Dedo no likee schleff, so schleff no likee Dedo."

This place must deserve Ben Tuck's bad name. I rode on into it.

Those who have El Dedo on their calling-list will agree that the town wasn't Americanized when our boundary moved south of it. Not then nor since. It might be in Sonora. A square with a well in it, the whole municipal water-supply, is the hub; out of that are two or three crooked streets like the last warped spokes in a broken wheel, dirty, no gutters you can notice, and adobe huts rubbing noses across them. Nothing our Puget Sound country would stand for! No public buildings of course; not even a lock-up. And nobody out of doors.

About ten yards off the square and behind the whitewashed mission, I found a cave marked "Fonda," rode through it and came to the hotel yard. It had never been paved, and I was smothered in a cloud of dust, but when that settled I saw a lot of *vagueros* loafing on the piazza with their blue and red saddle-blankets hung over the rail for their spurred feet to rest on. I went up to the least unlikely one of these. He was about black, but I judged he had two-thirds of his senses.

"I want help," I explained. "There's been a man killed down here at the first crossroads."

He was smoking a cigarette, like all his companions, and he took a slow puff of it.

"Bueno," said he and didn't move.

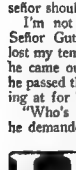
"Don't you understand American?" I shouted. "I'm telling you a man's been knifed and robbed!"

He shrugged his thin shoulders and looked at his buddies. They all shrugged.

"It is not the first time that a man has been killed," he passed the buck. "If this one is indeed dead, the señor's noise will not waken him, and he can be in no hurry; he has now all of God's eternity. The señor should see Señor Guthrie."

I'm not touchy, but if I hadn't seen Señor Guthrie right then, I might have lost my temper. However, at that minute, he came out of the doorway, filling it as he passed through; and he was worth looking at for his own sake.

"Who's yere takin' my name in vain?" he demanded.



HE WAS a blond young Hercules with a big Stetson tilted over his yellow hair, and he struck me as being physical strength and strength of character just about evenly balanced by a bluff good-humor. Those lazy *vagueros* smiled at him, but they jumped, too, and they told him my trouble.

He came toward me. I judged he had his little vanities, because his riding-clothes were well made, and he wore a fairly large solitaire diamond on his left little finger; but he showed keen blue eyes, was serious enough now and gave me a man's handshake. Jason Guthrie had lived in Equality for the last fifteen years, he told me later on that day, and was in law and land-speculation and county politics. Just now he asked only quick, sensible questions.

"Did yo' get a good look at the killer?" he wound up.

I described the fellow. Nobody could forget that smudge of a nose.

"Nope," said Guthrie. "I don' know him." He turned on the porch ornaments and repeated my description. "Any o' you-all recognize that?"

They looked as blank as the Chinaman did when I talked about police.

"I reckon," Guthrie turned back to me, "he was from over the line, an' like's not he's back thar by now. I'm sorry to tell yo' suh, that things like this yere ain't so infrequent in an' roun' Dedo as they'd ought to be, an' I'd hate to risk money that some o' our frien's in town don' now an' then profit accordin'." He hardly lowered his big voice, but saw my look of warning. "Oh, I'm not skeered," he laughed, "jes' a mite discouraged. We're doin' our best from Equality to spread some crude notions o' order down yere, but I'll be frank with yo', it's missionary work, Mr. Satterlee—missionary work in a damn stubborn field."

He was a hustler, though. We decided there was no use my riding back to the scene of the murder, since it was at a known spot, but he hurried out three posses to scour the country on what he said he feared would be a fool's errand. Then he got the landlord to send men for the body, and started another fellow to notify the Catholic priest and a traveling evangelist who had tried to grubstake in Dedo and was just giving up the job.

"Not knowin' the dead gentleman's religious predilections," he said, "I aim to be on the safe side an' give him a kind o' union funeral service. Now, thar's no sense in yo' an' me jinin' up with these yere posses. Not knowin' the lay o' the land we'd only hold 'em back. Yo' stoppin' yere fo' a spell?"

I said I'd meant to move on north next day, but I'd stay over if the coroner needed me.

"Glad to hev yo'," said Guthrie, "fo' I'm not goin' back to Equality myself till I clean up a li'l land deal yere, but yo' needn't worry 'bout the coroner. I've a li'l political pull, an' I'm a notary-public an' kin take yo'r deposition."

He did it, too, right in the stale-smelling barroom, which didn't seem to have heard of the Eighteenth Amendment. He carried a fountain-pen and a seal the way most men around there carried guns. The Mexican landlord furnished some paper that looked as if all the crooks in Dedo had been thumb-printed on it.

"Have a li'l drink?" Guthrie concluded. "Bein' a kind o' representative o' the law, I don't take it myself—leastways not in public—but our brave host yere's got somethin' he calls tea. It'd be flattery to call it anythin' else; still, it'll do what any liquor will, an' do it quicker'n most."

I said I didn't think I'd chance it, and we walked out in the town. It was nearly sundown now, and the population was gathering at the well for the night's water. Guthrie asked me about my trip.

"You'll have to hang out over tomorrow night at the Rancho de las Rosas," he said, "unless you mean to take it quick. It's five mile' back o' the main road, fust branch to yo'r right. Not much of a place, suh,

but the only one. I'm thinkin' some o' buyin' it, perhaps fo' myself, perhaps fo' a client."

He had a hearty enthusiasm about his business schemes and talked them over with big gestures that made his diamond ring flash. We'd come into the square, and I saw half a dozen women glowering at a girl because a whole jury of men were bowing and scraping to her.

"Who's that," I asked.

Guthrie didn't hear me. He headed right for the girl, and I didn't blame him.

Myself, I'm not strong for brunettes, but this one was a wonder. A tall tortoiseshell comb held her shining hair, blue-black, away up on her little head, carried as if it was used to a coronet. A mantilla—I figured it must have come from Spain and been made centuries ago—fell down behind her, instead of being worn in the usual way, and framed her oval face that seemed to have carnations under its olive skin. She had twin dimples and a smile showing teeth like the seeds in a pomegranate, and yet her large dark eyes were moist and sort of melancholy.

She walked like a princess in mourning, but she carried a big terra-cotta pitcher resting on an undulating hip. The village lounge-lizards were all offering to help her—and were all being politely refused.

"Who is it?" I asked again when I caught up to Guthrie.

"Rosalia Martinez," he answered. "Her father used fo' to own El Rancho de las Rosas."

He was bowing to her now along with the most Mexican of them, his diamond flashing like her eyes. He put out his hands and she—I could see hers were as if they'd been carved out of old ivory—handed him the jug.

Then there came a shot.

IT CAME from a doorway clear across the square. A slim, dark fellow was leaning against a pillar. He had a face like a swarthy cameo, proud nose, proud mouth under a small mustache and eyes that were black fires. When I looked at him he was lowering a smoking revolver; when I looked back at the well the pitcher lay broken between Guthrie and the Senorita Martinez. There hadn't been half a yard separating them, and that marksman was a good thirty-five yards away. It was about the best shot I'd ever seen.

Yet nobody seemed excited except the shooter. The lizards had jumped back, but the echoes of the explosion weren't over before that crowd was busy with other matters. The girl smiled, and Guthrie just laughed and waved his diamond ring at the doorway.

"Yo' placed that one mighty good, Anchorema," he called; "but if yo'd been as spry on yo'r feet as I am yo' wouldn't 've had to use yo'r trigger-finger!"

I'm never Johnny-on-the-spot myself, but I thought I might as well get in on this. There was a dusty one-horse store across the square with some pitchers in its window like the broken one, and I went in and bought a sample. When I came back I found Miss Rosalia and Guthrie gossiping as if nothing had happened—and their jealous aristocrat friend leaning against the well-wall and joining in the talk. His eyes were still on fire, and there were red spots under each high cheekbone, but he was with them just the same, and I couldn't for the life of me tell which of the two fellows the little lady liked better.

Guthrie, in his bluff, hearty way, introduced me to both, and so I learned that the dark man's full name was Felipe Anchorema and that he was a native of the town, born in an old family—run to seed, I judged—recently back from some Spanish university and just admitted to the state bar. Jason Guthrie rattled all this off, and Anchorema smiled, but his voice sounded to me as if there was something like gravel in his craw.

"And what has the *caballero* there?" he wanted to know, pointing at my pitcher

Of course I'd meant to replace the broken one. Somehow now it didn't seem as if I'd make anybody happy by doing it, but I had to go through with the thing, and I certainly wasn't afraid of Mr. Felipe, so I just stated my purpose and handed the jug to the girl.

She took it with the prettiest sort of smile; she worked her dimples for all they were worth, and to reckon by her eyes you'd have thought I was handing her a million dollars. But Anchorema blew up again.

"A gift!" he yells—at her, not at me. "You, a lady Martinez, accept a gift from a strange *Americano*? Revenge of God, that I should live to—"

His fingers whipped to his holster again. I grabbed his right wrist.

"Look here," I said, "I like trap-shooting as well as anybody, but not inside the city limits."

Miss Rosalia snapped at him, just plain snapped, and Guthrie had to pull his heartiest laugh to quiet things down. I confess I was mad enough to let Anchorema take me for a walk so's we could have had a couple of shots at each other, but I recollected in time that Señorita Martinez was only a brunette after all, and I knew I was making a show of myself by being as cantankerous as this Felipe, so I got out of the trouble by letting him buy the pitcher from me and present it to her.

As Guthrie and I walked away, I asked him when the pair were going to get married.

"Well," said Guthrie, twisting that ring on his finger, "Felipe's fust legal proposition's to settle her father's estate. I reckon she figures on makin' him do that fust off, an' I reckon it ain't goin' to be a eight-hour job, neither. Meantime, lots o' things mote happen." He clapped me on the back with one of his big hands. "Afore that," he said, "though I admit Mr. Anchorema's the best revolver-shot in this part o' the country, why thar ain't no tellin', ole man, but what yo'r frien' Jason G. mote get a chance at marryin' the li'l lady himself."

But I looked back over my shoulder and saw Felipe. If the eyes with which he was following Guthrie meant anything, they meant that he wouldn't let "my friend" win in a walk.

Chapter III

THROUGH A WINDOW

HE was a handsome fellow in a proud way, that Anchorema. For all his being little, he had something of the lines of a fine pedigreed horse about his slim figure, and you couldn't think of him doing the downright crooked. But you couldn't think of him stopping short of any violence, either, if he were properly stirred up. It seemed to me it didn't take much to stir him, and it also seemed he was stirred up now for fair—and probably had been several days—by Guthrie's attentions to Rosalia. Felipe wasn't the man I'd pick for an enemy, unless I wanted a fight to a finish, and I said so to that blond young Hercules from Equality.

Guthrie, though, just laughed.

"Shucks, the boy'll ride off," he said in that bluff way of his. "I've studied Felipe ever since he came back yere. He'll start in a lather, git on his horse, tear about 'cross-country, an' come back with all the foam off'n him an' only his critter in a sweat."

I was beginning to learn that this was Jason Guthrie's habit of dealing with trouble. He could brush danger out of his mind by one of his jovial guffaws, the way he must have been able to sweep over the average fellow who attacked him, by a half-strength push of his open palm.

He toted me around what was left of the town as if he hadn't a care in the world. He showed me the corner where the last sheriff from Equality, before the present one, had been found dead with ten bullets, all fired into his back. He pointed out the alley where they'd come across the body of the only Prohibition Enforcement agent who ever went to Dedo, and then he took me to the edge of things and said that was where he planned to build a hotel.

Guthrie certainly got all the respect from the natives that a popular politician had a right to ask. He'd slap them on the shoulders in a democratic kind of heartiness that would almost knock them down, but they didn't come back with it. They always took off their glazed sombreros to him, and it was "May the Señor Guthrie live a century" every time.

We had reports that were sent in by the posses, but none was encouraging—not even a trail struck yet. The messengers were returned with stiff cursings-out, and we went to the mission church's mortuary, where they'd brought the corpse of the poor fellow I'd seen murdered. Guthrie had about the whole town walk in and take a look. No use; they said they'd never seen him before.

We got to the *fonda* at last and had supper in the barroom. Then Guthrie said he usually played a little game of cards here evenings, when he was in Dedo, just to let the town boys win and keep them in good temper.

"Tryin' to teach 'em civilization," he said. "I admire to git 'em away from their low-down Mexican forms o' gamblin', an' poker's the greatest Americanizer in the world. Try a hand?"

I thought I might.

"Yo'll not lose much," Guthrie assured, "fo' I aim to keep the stakes down 'cause o' peace an' quiet. But yo' won't win, neither—yo' cyan't. Jes' don' seem to notice like when a Mex takes a fo'th king out'n his sleeve."

That barroom's only decorations were sentimental home-and-mother lithographs

that they used to give away with the Sunday supplements in the 'nineties. The room was darkish and had no more idea of ventilation than a steer has of aeroplanes. At first it smelled sour of yesterday's bad liquor and a hundred years' cigarettes; pretty soon, as it filled up, it smelled worse of fresh *aguardiente* and green tobacco. Men kept coming in, men in bright colored *serapes*, but none went out, and soon it was hard work to get your breath.

There were only three players at our table, besides Guthrie and myself—all border-scum. I remember one of them: Porfirio, a zapotec from the mountains, lithe and yellow, with a pointed nose and fierce mustaches. He talked Spanish oaths in a whisky-voice, but I think he had more than a drop of Indian blood in him. Porfirio picked up his cards and threw them down with quick, darting motions, and he was the boy who did most of the sleeve-work that Lawyer Guthrie had spoken about. I didn't mind, for I was just a kind of sightseer, and everybody else seemed fooled. I just sat there, facing a window that looked over the piazza and onto the courtyard, and I trailed on nearly every pot, but never raised anybody, no matter what I held. Guthrie was at my left, his diamond flashing whenever it was his deal. The other fellows hunched over the table and couldn't see anything but it and their cards.

HAT'S the way things were when, along about ten o'clock, there was the clatter of a horse outside. Soon Felipe Anchorema came in. He was quite cool, like young Hercules had said he'd be; cool outside, at least, but I thought his black eyes were shining the way they did when I saw him lowering his revolver over in the square. He walked to where we were sitting.

"Me," he said, "I have been for a ride over the border."

We'd just drawn cards, and I was the only one that would look up.

"Had a nice quiet trip?" asks Guthrie, edging his pasteboards a quarter of an inch from one another.

"I hear something," Felipe went on. "Meets me at Oreja a frien'. He tells to me that Simon Zaldumbide is coming north."

If Anchorema had thrown a hand-grenade on the table he couldn't have raised more of a sensation, except for Hercules. A man who was going to bet let his chips roll all over the board, and one of the others tried to crib them. One fellow half got up. Porfirio's long nose twitched.

"*Absurdo!*" choked the first player.

"*D-disparatado!*" his neighbor clattered.

Only Guthrie took it easy. He nodded to the bottle at the zapotec's elbow.

"H'ist thet vitriol over to Felipe; he's been dreamin'."

I remembered Ben Tuck's saying something about there being in Dedo a lot of a gang that was headed by a man named Simon somebody.

"Who's Zaldumbide?" I asked.

They took that almost the way they'd taken Anchorema's news, but Guthrie let out one of his big, hearty laughs.

"I calc'late there *is* sich a man," he said, fo' I've been his lawyer, by correspondence, in one or two matters appertainin' to a Mexican beneficial association he's pres'dent of down in Forallon; but nobody this side the line's ever set eyes on him's fur's I know, though there's them as wants to, 'cause o' some li'l smugglin' operations laid to his do'. Matter o' fac', Satt'lee, he's pretty much what we-all call a legal fiction. 'Cause a couple o' his hangers-on mebbe carved up that Enfo'cement Agent as was killed yere, it's tol'able convenient to say he ordered done eve'ythin' awkward as happens 'tween Equality an' Oreja."

Anchorema put a thin, nervous hand on my shoulder.

"Señor," said he, "if ever you should see, sitting in a car perhaps, a man hairless of the head and face——"

He didn't finish, for just then I saw something else, something very different in appearance from the man he had been describing.

While Felipe spoke, I happened to look toward the window opposite me. Pressed against the pane and staring at me or Guthrie was a mug that I had good cause to know. A ragged scar, dirty white, ran from one corner of the mouth to the ear above it; the nose was so small and flat that it could hardly be called a nose at all. The thing was like an angry ape; and it was the murderer, the knifeman of the crossroads.

I let out a loud yell and reached for my gun. My chair smashed back of me. I remember I was on my feet and pointing with my left hand toward the window.

"There he is! There's the man that killed the American!"

As I jumped the face vanished. The players rose, too, the drinkers hustled over from the bar; but before any eyes followed my finger the window was empty.

"Be yo' sho', Satt'lee?" called Guthrie.

"Yes!" I was running to the door.

"Guns!" Guthrie shouted. "Everybody out!"

The crowd followed me. The lawyer, more level-headed, flung up the window and jumped out that way, Anchorema going with him. Both were leaping the porch-rail as I came out by the front door.

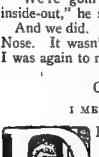
The moon hadn't risen yet, and the courtyard was dark. What was more important, it was empty. My herculean friend ordered lanterns.

"We're goin' to turn this yere town inside-out," he said with easy decision.

And we did. But we didn't find Smudge Nose. It wasn't at El Dedo del Pie that I was again to meet him.

Chapter IV

I MEET THE PEDDLER



IGHT off, I didn't sleep well at the *fonda* of El Dedo del Pie; my room smelled bad; the bed was overpopulated, and the doorbolt was only a peg. Everybody had wound up the search by telling me I hadn't seen anything at the window, but by now I knew enough of the town's record to put mighty little faith in the folks I found there, except Anchorema, who'd just got back, and Guthrie, who lived in Equality. I didn't like the look of smudge-nose's disappearance.

The way it always goes after such a night, I dropped off to sleep at about sunup and missed rising with the birds. Still, I was ahead of my lawyer friend, having to leave goodby for him with the landlord. I was glad to put Dedo behind me, and my Hermosillo mustang showed better spirits than I had ever seen in him.

At first the road ran through the fagends of some cattle ranches, pretty seedy, but soon things dried up entirely and turned to sagebrush and cactus and began to hint at heavy sand. I was thinking about that poor fellow I'd seen murdered. I knew it would have been useless for me to stay, and I'd left my route, so far as I could calculate it, with Guthrie so that he could send for me in case something turned up; but, as the country became more solemn, I got more and more out of the notion of what I was doing. Perhaps that was what made me look back at the way I'd come.

Only about five hundred yards behind me was a man riding my way. I couldn't pick out much more than that, for his horse bulged with saddle-bags, and the fellow had an oldish stoop that bent him over his pommel. He didn't seem in a hurry, but I rather fancied company, so I slacked a bit to let him catch up with me. When I looked again, however, he was standing in the trail with his back to me and seemed to be taking a stone out of his nag's off-forehoof.

I rode on and didn't think any more about it—then.

The sun grew hot. There wasn't any wind, and yet somehow the smell of baking gum-trees came across the miles of flat country between me and the hills away to eastward and made it all the hotter. Except for the road and the telephone-wires along it, it seemed as if nobody'd ever been here before. As for that, the road wasn't much. It had been roasted so long that it was as full of heat-gullies, some of them two feet deep, as a reservation medicine-man's face is full of wrinkles.

My mustang stumbled over one, and then I looked back again, being kind of jolted out of my day-dreaming. There was that man, still just about five hundred yards behind, and again bent over his pommel.

I figured he must be some sort of peddler, but I couldn't help feeling he kept that pace deliberately. I wasn't so set on his company now, for I don't like being followed.

I drew up. So did he.

Perhaps I ought to have had it out with him straight off, but up in my country we don't pick quarrels with a man who doesn't want to pass us on the road, and I told myself that yesterday had fiddled my nerves. I went ahead.

There never was a nastier district. No cattle now, nothing moving anywhere in front or on the right or left of me. People talk about the face of the land; this land wore a flat brown mask without any features and nothing but those sun-seams in it. The hills to the east were no more than a purple rim, and on the west the plain ran along till the sky came down and stopped it. Everything was blazing with light—and every thing was as gloomy as a funeral.

The morning dragged itself away. When I'd look ahead, there was always the same thing; when I'd look back, there was the bent peddler always far enough away to make me uncertain whether he took any account of me, but always close enough to make me suspicion that he did.

"I'll not do anything till I turn off to that Ranch of the Roses," I said to myself. "If he follows me up that road, he's got to tell me why."

At last I struck it, as Guthrie said. It wasn't a much used trail, but the land was higher here, and I could see the track made a wide half-circle and came back to the main road perhaps eight miles farther on. It was easy to pick out the ranch along that half-circle's farther edge.

Ranch? It might have been that once. Now it was the thing I hate most to see, good land that's been allowed to go bad. The place was a kind of cup and had been better soil than any of the country around, but nobody'd done a thing to it for I couldn't tell how long. There were a few trees, all neglected, and I could see where there'd been acres of pasture. Away beyond them, I caught sight of some water, most likely the salt-pond that I'd heard about. Then I saw a walled-in space with the glint of a house's red tiles above it. There were some shabby crows overhead, and the telephone-wires ran this way. That was all—but somebody'd had the nerve to call the place El Rancho de las Rosas!

I turned in and looked over my shoulder. No peddlers.

Thinking how near I'd come to making a fool of myself about him, I rode on till I was well along that wall. It was high and sunburned, and the collection of broken bottles set hospitably in its top edge must have been begun while Cortes was alive. However, I could see the upper story of the house above it, and there was a big nail-studded gate, a little way along.

There was something else. There was a short-cut, or a fellow that I thought I'd seen behind me a while ago had made one. It would have been easy enough of course for anyone who knew the country, because my eyes were occupied with that adobe wall. Anyhow, here, riding toward me, came the peddler.

"Don't go in there!" he yelled.

A peddler? He was got up like one for the road. Old? Not much! He wasn't stooping now. He had me covered with a gun and had come close enough to be recognized at last. Ape-face, scar from ear to mouth, smudge nose—the knifeman!

"Put up your hands!"

I did it. The drop was his. There hadn't been time to think of defense.

MY MUSTANG stopped in its tracks. The fellow came on till he could have touched me. Then I could tell he wasn't any more a Mexican than I am. He was border-scum, like Porfirio and some of the others at the *fonda*, but, unless I'm much mistaken, he'd been born north of the line; I never saw anything uglier than the devil-ish eyes of him.

"What do you want?" I asked. "My money?" I had little enough, but I was going to tell him where it wasn't and take a chance on collaring him while he dug after it.

He shook his head.

"You're not wanted 'round this ranch," he informed me. "Nobody is. And I'm to see you safe the other side of Equality, if you behave yourself."

So he must have known I was coming here almost from the time I started! Well, that wasn't so strange, seeing there wasn't anything else short of the county-town, though most of the few travelers probably stuck to the main road and slept alongside it. The thing that interested me just then was his keeping his wicked eyes right on mine; that was exactly what I wanted.

"Look here," I said, stalling for all I was worth, "I'm from Washington State. We're all saddle-broke up there, but we like to know whose orders we're taking. Suppose you give me your name-card."

He grinned an evil grin. I remember he had two black teeth in the middle of his upper jaw. Then he shoved his gun closer.

"I don't want to shoot you right here, 'less'n I've got to."

"You weren't so particular over at the crossroads back of Dedo."

"There ain't here." He edged his mount a mite more. "Never mind my name. I'm talkin' fer somebody else."

"Then let me hear who it is."

He hesitated a fraction of a second. His voice dropped a whole octave, and I thought he might be going to say something worth listening to, but he cut that out, and if his tone was low it got back its bossy twang.

"None o' your damn business. It's somebody a sight more important than you

are. Come on now. Keep your hands up an' start. I'll never be mor'n five yards behind you."

I'd freed my left foot from its stirrup a good minute ago. I let his nag have it in the throat.

Bing! The animal reared. The revolver tried to shoot the sun. I threw the top of me at Smudge Nose, grabbed him as if I'd been a long deserted wife, and the two of us slid down to the road.

It was a hefty yank, but I don't pretend to recollect all its details. I know the horses ambled off a few feet to avoid us, the way horses will, and stopped there as if they weren't responsible for anything that happened afterward and hadn't any concern in it, anyhow. I know the fellow's revolver flew nobody knew where, and that I was kept too busy to try to pull my own. And I know first I had him under me and next I could feel the soft hot dust against the back of my own neck.

Once in the Cascade Range, north of Wenatchee Lake, I saw a couple of timber wolves fighting, and that was just like this. I'm sure the fellow broke one of his bad teeth on me, and I remember our rolling over and over, gouging and jabbing, because neither of us could get in a fair blow. He was heavy-set and he had a knife somewhere. I was wiry, but lighter. Each tried to keep the other from using his advantages. But at last he tired me and realized he did. He gave me an ugly shove and dove after his pistol.

Quickly I got back on my feet and took a run at him. He wheeled and caught my right on the point of the jaw. He teetered; his hands dropped. I let him have my left full on that apology of a nose, and down he went for a clean knockout.

Then it came into my mind I'd seen him go through the fellow he killed. Although I was figuring on taking my prisoner to Equality somehow; I thought this would be a first-rate opportunity to search him, so I opened up his shirt and found a letter pinned to it against his hairy chest. I stowed the paper away and was going ahead with my frisking when—a dog barked and a woman laughed.

The bark was savage. The laugh was half hysterical. One came from behind the adobe wall, the other from up and inside it.

I stared. Above the gate and a little to its left, there was a small embrasure that must have been about as deep as a tunnel, and out of this a girl had stuck her head and shoulders. I figured she was standing on a ladder.

She was sunburned, but blonde. She had eyes like violets and tumbled chestnut hair. She was—well, believe me or not, then and there, dirty from the road and breathing hard from my battle, right there, with that murderer under me and liable to come to life at any minute, it was just as if God whispered to me: "Here she is. This is the one woman for you."

I walked over to the part of the wall that was under that lookout. I don't know what I said at first, but I'll bet it hadn't a thing to do with what I thought or what she saw.

"This man attacked you?" she asked.

"He did—some," I admitted. "I hope he don't belong inside."

Her eyes grew wider.

"I should say he doesn't belong here! What made you think that?"

"Because he said I wasn't to go in."

"He said—" Her forehead puckered up. She let her eyes wander toward where I left Smudge. "Look out! *Look out!*"

I waltzed 'round, but my man was quicker than I. He was on his horse, digging in with his spurs. He rode at me. This time I found my revolver.

"Stop!" I yelled.

He saw I had him, that way, so he did an about-face. His mount plunged down the road. I fired, but the fight had left me a bit shaky and I missed.

Smudge, in a regular dust-cloud that had it all over a smoke-screen, was beating it in the direction of El Dedo del Pie.

CHAPTER V

A MATTER OF MUSCLE

KATE—slow I am, but I soon found out that was her name—Kate was down from her ladder and in the road.

"I'm so glad you got here!" she said. Her voice was contralto.

She rattled me. She was all her face had promised, full size and sturdy, but slim and graceful, at that. Her eyelashes regularly fringed her violet eyes, and those eyes were honest, and she had the generous kind of mouth.

"So'm I glad," I said; and that was straight, anyhow.

"Your letter," she went on. "I thought I saw——"

"He'd stolen that letter," I told her.

She looked me over shrewdly and then—as if she was satisfied, though how anybody could have O. K.'d my personal appearance the way I was looking, I didn't understand—she put out the most neighborly hand in the world. I took it. She had a firm grip.

"I suppose I oughtn't to say it, because I'm a woman," she said, "but I watched all that fight, and it was splendid." She had my mustang's bridle and was leading him toward the gate.

Her eyes just danced her approval, and it made me stammer. She must have taken that for hesitation: her expression changed to real trouble, and she touched my arm and looked right up into my face.

"Oh, you will help us, won't you?" she asked earnestly.

"You can bet your life I will," I blurted, mentally vowing that no earthly power would stop me from helping that girl, whatever kind of help she wanted.

She smiled again, only she was sad, too.

"Perhaps it means that *you'll* be betting *yours*," she said thoughtfully.

I wanted to ask her about a hundred and ten questions, but I judged I'd better wait a while. So I followed her through the gate without another word and helped her bar it with a piece of timber as thick as my arm, after she'd headed my mustang to a little corral inside the grounds, where there were some more nags like him.

The staring glare of the outside didn't get past those walls, for the character of the soil changed within them; inside there were trees and shade and a sort of restful quiet like you see in convent-gardens. I didn't have to wonder any more how the place came by its name; except for the corral and the path and a square in front of the house, all the grounds were a mass of plants, and most of the plants were roses, Castilian roses at that. Those grounds were all color and perfume.

"Now then, Peter, keep down—down!" Kate was saying. "This gentleman is going to help you take care of us. Shake hands with him, Peter."

Peter was the dog, a mighty fine collie, but he had lightning in his eyes and teeth that made you think twice. I like dogs and know something about them, and I saw right away that this was a good guard. Kate had to hold him hard till she'd introduced us, and then, while she stooped down beside him, he sat on his hind legs and gave me a paw.

"I'm for you now, but it's lucky she explained things," that paw said, plain as words.

His mistress sent him about his business then, for she said he had to stay out in the grounds all the time now. She started to take me to the house, I wondering whether Smudge Nose had knocked me out instead of me knocking him, and fearing I'd wake up.

THE building had been Spanish once, but times had changed it first and American women afterward. You could see the roof had been carried clear over what used to be the inside courtyard. There was a shed built against the right wing, and the gloom couldn't stand up to the bright curtains at the windows. It was two stories high and looked comfortable. That was what I noticed first. The next thing I noticed was that those curtains were at the second-story windows; the downstairs shutters all were closed tightly.

Kate took me into a long, cool hall that was a kind of sitting-room modern enough to have a telephone against the wall. Lighted lamps made up for the closed shutters.

"Mother!" she called. "Mr. Allen!"

A lot of doors opened off the hall, and a woman came through one of these, a smell of good food following her. She was tall and thoroughbred; had white hair and the kind of calm that comes through standing to hard luck and keeping your mouth shut about it. Very neat she was and a little stiff so that I was a mite afraid of her, but when she began to talk without waiting for any silly introduction, I liked her.

"Ah'm right glad to see yo', suh," she said. "Have yo' had any lunch?"

I shook hands and asked her if she was't from Virginia. There'd been some Virginia replacements in our outfit at Montfaucon. Nothing I could have said would have pleased Mrs. Tyrrell more.

"Yes, suh," she declared, "an' Culpeper County. Ah been West ever since mah li'l gyrl was bawn, an' Ah was bawn mysel' after the War o' the States, but my pa, Cu'nl Richard Tyson o' Runnymede, raised me in the ole tradition, an' Ah've tried to raise mah daughter like Ah was raised."

"Mr. Allen!" called Kate.

"Wait a minute—wait a *minute!*" comes a crackling voice from behind another door.

Soon it opened and a fussy little man trotted in, stuffing a paper-bound book into his pocket while he ran.

Ben Tuck had told me this Mr. Allen was in his seventies, otherwise I'd never have thought it. The only thing old about him was that he wore carpet-slippers and that they were colored green and had yellow flowers embroidered on them. He was short and featherweight, but he stood up straight as a top-sergeant in a loose suit of light tweeds. There wasn't much gray in his hair or pointed beard, and he had the twinkling eyes of a fighter. He simply sputtered energy. I could see there wasn't any chance for anybody else to get the center of the stage when he was around. He talked like the frictional electricity we used to grind out with a glass disk at high-school.

"Mr. Allen," began Kate, "this——"

Up went his right palm to stop her.

"I know—I know. Don't waste words, my dear. Glad to meet you, sir. Yes, I'm Aritas Allen. Let me have a look at you." He dropped my hand and began tapping my chest.

"I think——" said I.

"Pup-pup-pup-pup!" he sputtered. "Not now—not now. All the young generation talk too much." He clapped an ear to my ribs. "Say 'A-a-ah'!"

I looked at the women. Mrs. Tyrrell wouldn't have shown surprise if the roof had fallen; Kate just smiled and nodded that he wasn't crazy and put a finger to her lips to tell me to keep quiet as long as I could. So I said 'A-a-ah' as if I were an opera singer.

Mr. Allen popped his face up to mine.

"Drink?" he shot at me.

"Not much chance these days."

"Good thing." He pointed to a contrivance on a table with an alcohol lamp. "I never drank anything stronger than coffee in my life and never will; but I don't trust even the best of women—and they're these two here—to make it for me. See that bottle? That's my coffee-essence, 'specially prepared for me. Just heat this, pour coffee in a cup, add hot water and serve. Good to wake you up and good to put you to sleep."

"Yes, sir," I said. I felt I ought to.

"Now then, your letter," said he.

Well, I looked at Kate again, and she nodded a second time. What could I do? I handed him the letter I'd taken from Smudge Nose.

Mr. Allen gave it the once-over with his snappy eyes and tossed it to Kate.

"Bare your arm," he commanded me; and, when I hesitated, he nearly danced with impatience.

He felt the biceps attentively, nodded and measured my reach. Then he put me through an examination almost as thorough as those army surgeons gave volunteers in early '17. He had me walk the whole length of the room, made me bend over and touch my toes a dozen times running. He kneaded my calves and looked down my throat—and I was too much up in the air not to do whatever he said.

"Gray eyes with crowsfeet; beak nose; straight mouth; tall and wiry; all muscle," he ran off my description. "Do you gamble?"

I remembered last night's game, but over his shoulder Kate shook her chestnut-brown head; I'm afraid I lied.

"Eyes?" said he while I got my breath. "How's your sight?"

"Mr. Allen—" I started.

His hand went up like a traffic-cop's.

"One minute, young man. That'll keep. File what you want to say. Now come out here and shoot."

HE led the way to that shed against the right wing, and set up a target. He handed me a loaded gun, then stood aside. I would have laughed, only out of the corners of my eyes I saw that the women were at his heels, and they both looked as anxious as he did. What it was all about was beyond me, but I shot straight, the way I mostly do, and he shook hands once more.

"Young man," he said, "you have a chance to live as long as I will, and I don't propose to die for many a year. Precautions, just common sense precautions, that's all we're taking. Now, if you're as good with your fists as you are with this——"

"He fights wonderfully," said Kate, and she got in a lot of exaggerated stuff about what she'd seen over the wall. She even beat Mr. Allen to the pulpit, but he didn't let her hold it long.

"All right, all right," he said, though he was evidently pleased. "Now get this man into the kitchen, ladies. I've got something to attend to." He tapped the pocket where he'd put that book and went on, to me; "We've had our meal and you must take pot-luck, but we mean to keep you in good trim."

Then he trotted away, talking all the time and tugging at the book that had got mixed up with his pocket-knife. I followed the womenfolk and soon was seated at a kitchen table eating as good a dinner as

I ever had in my life. I was ready for it, too, but I was even more curious than hungry. I could just hold my tongue till Mrs. Tyrrell left the room; then I whisked 'round toward Kate.

"Miss Tyrrell," I asked, "since you've been kind enough to recommend me as a good fighter, do you much mind telling me who it is that I'm to fight?"

She gave me that honest look of hers, and her answer about put me out of business.

"I don't know," she said.

"You don't know?" I gasped. "What do you——"

"Ever since Mr. Allen came here, about a week ago," she came back in a queer, awestruck kind of voice, "he's been thinking somebody was trying to get into these grounds. The dog has scared them off once or twice, and once Mr. Allen shot at something. Didn't that San Diego lawyer tell you when he sent you?"

I'd dropped my knife and fork long ago. "Lawyer?" I said. "I—I've been trying to say right along that nobody sent me ——"

"But your papers!"

"My what?"

She spread out the letter Allen had taken from me and tossed to her, the letter I'd got off Smudge Nose. Sure enough, the letter-head was a San Diego lawyer's. I read something like this:

My dear Mr. Allen:

The bearer of this note will fill the bill. He is strong, clear-headed, a good shot and altogether to be relied on. Was a fighting man in France and got the Médaille Militaire. I still feel you are acting unwisely, but you may as always count on my doing your bidding.

Yours truly,
Basil J. Broughton.

My face must have showed now what I was thinking. Anyhow, Kate who'd rolled her sleeves up for the kitchen work, sat down opposite me and leaned her pretty elbows on the table.

"What's the mistake?" she asked.

I hated to tell her, but she talked level and straight and I knew she'd get it sooner or later.

"Yesterday," said I, "I was on Rogers' Road south of El Dedo when I came across that man that you watched me scrap with this afternoon. From where you were looking out today, you couldn't have got a line on all that happened or you'd have seen that I took this bit of paper from him."

Her face lost some of its color.

"You mean——"

"When I saw him first," I said, "he was taking everything of value off a man he'd just killed, and, unless I'm a bad guesser, this letter was part of the loot, the part he was most after."

"Oh!" Her voice choked with horror and her hands somehow flew to her face, but she forced herself to put her thought in words. "Then the right man—the man Mr. Allen expected——"

"Was murdered," said I.

I pulled her hands down and held them firmly for a moment and looked her full in the face. She didn't flinch, so, in my slow way, I made up my mind then and there.

"My name," I went on, "is Matt Satterlee, and I own a prune ranch in the Puget Sound country. I'm not the fellow you expected, and prune-raising maybe doesn't train fighters, but I did see some of the show in France—and, such as I am, and whatever this is all about, I'm going to see it through for you."

CHAPTER VI

THE SOUND OF FALLING GLASS

KATE told me her story. Her father had died when she was about five years old and had left nothing; her mother—they were living in San Diego—fought hard to keep up the home, and Kate had to help as soon as she was old enough. It was a losing game. One day, about eighteen months ago, they heard that Mr. Allen wanted somebody to take care of the house on this far-away property he'd bought, just somebody that'd keep it from suffering the way any house will that's not lived in; and here they were.

They didn't know any more about him than that he was quite a rich man, till he'd turned up last week; then all they could figure was that he was afraid of something or somebody; had come here, they decided to hide, and was followed. He wrote to his lawyer for a guard—and at the rest I had as good a guess as anyone.

Well, you'd say my duty was plain enough. I ought to have braced Aritas Allen for the facts, got help if they warranted it and sent the women away. But

if you say that, it shows you never knew Mr. Allen and haven't much knowledge of ladies. Mr. Allen was Mr. Allen, and woman had the power of the veto, and learned how to use it, long before they got the power to vote.

"Do you expect an attack in force?" I asked Kate.

She didn't know.

"We don't know more than I've told you," she said, "and Mr. Allen won't tell us anything. We just know something dreadful's expected. Can't you feel it?"

I'm not much on feeling things ahead of their happening, but I did think it was queer the way Smudge Nose had killed a man for what seemed the purpose of impersonating him here; and the ranch was so desolate and so far away from everything else that I couldn't but admit 'most anything could happen on it. So when Mrs. Tyrrell came back, I suggested my riding for help.

Vetoed. They wouldn't be left alone with only Mr. Allen.

Then I remembered the telephone. I'd use that.

Vetoed also. Mr. Allen had given strong orders against its being used without his permission.

Would they go away? Veto No. 3. Not while Mr. Allen was in trouble, and not alone. Mr. Allen wouldn't leave, and it wouldn't do for me to leave him.

"Then," I told them, "I'm going to put the case up to the old gentleman.

They smiled as much as to say it wasn't any use—and it wasn't. He was locked up in that room I'd seen him come out of. He wouldn't leave it, he wouldn't let me in, and he wouldn't listen to me through the door. He talked behind a panel like the blowing-out of a fuse, and I couldn't stick a word in edgewise.

I judged I'd have to catch him when he came out for supper. Then I remembered Ben Tuck saying he might be along here about that time, so I calculated to use him for a messenger to Equality, for I didn't want to try the telephone in defiance of orders and get these women in wrong with the man to whom they owed the roof over their heads. Still, feeling that I ought to make myself as handy as possible. I went around the walled-in grounds with Kate.

I made myself a closer friend of Peter, for he was a nice dog and loved Kate, and I drew water from the scanty well and took it into the house. Then I saw after the horses, and Kate showed me over the grounds. Nearly every window and door of the house could be made safe against ordinary intrusion. I thought it would have taken a burglar's kit to get through any of them, once they were closed for the night—excepting one window above the shed-roof, which had no shutter and only the regular kind of cast-iron catch.

"Mr. Allen says he's going to fix that," Kate told me, "as soon as he finishes what he's doing now."

I wished he'd finish it soon, whatever it was, and I finally sat down in the hall to wait for him. But he didn't.

IT WAS suppertime when that door opened. Then, however, I nailed him. I jumped up while his hand was still on the knob and, by walking right at him, walked him back where he'd come from. It was just a common sort of a room with a lot of books on a kind of library table.

"Mr. Allen—" I began.

He ups with a hand.

"Pup-pup-pup-pup-pup!" he sputtered.

But I went on talking while he sputtered away. I told him what I'd told Kate.

Was he pleased? I'll tell the world he wasn't!

"You young folks talk too much," he said. "Nothing wastes time so much as words do. All you've got to say doesn't do any more than confirm what I knew was true anyhow: there's somebody after me. Very well, young man, if you're not the fellow I mistook you for, you'll do as well as he would. Why talk about it?"

I said the women ought to leave. He grinned.

"Have you tried to make them do it?"

I said I'd telephone to the sheriff in Equality or for Jason Guthrie in El Dedo.

"If you attempt anything of the sort, —if you attempt to communicate with the authorities in any way," he declared, his bright eyes snapping, "I'll countermand your orders and say you're crazy."

"Mr. Allen—" I said.

"Pup-pup-pup-pup-pup!"

"—if you don't tell me more about all this thing," I went right on, "I'll think it's you that's crazy. If it wasn't for Mrs. Tyrrell and her daughter I doubt if I'd stay, anyhow."

He looked at me like an injured innocent.

"I can see you're all you pretend to be, now; but, even so, perhaps you can soon know as much about it as is necessary.

I've had two attacks made on my life, so I left the city and came here."

"You don't know why the attacks were made?"

"I don't *know*."

It sounded as if he was holding something back, but that his exact words were the truth.

"You must have done some wrong to somebody," I said, feeling like a revivalist ought to feel when he's prodding a fellow who's on the mourners' bench.

"Never hurt a fly in my life," Mr. Allen spluttered. He began to walk up and down the floor in his green carpet-slippers.

"Is anybody blackmailing you?"

"No, sir," he flashed. "Nobody's ever tried that with me, and nobody ever will." You might have thought I'd called him a blackmailer.

"But Mr. Allen, do you honestly mean to say you have no idea who it is wants to kill you? Haven't you received any threat or warning—no hint of any sort—not even an anonymous letter?" I had what seemed like an inspiration, and I was so puzzled by him and so miffed at him that I let it out. "You've made a will of course. Mightn't there be somebody who'd want to profit by—well, by having it probated as soon as possible?"

All this time I'd been speaking, he was pup-pupping and holding up a hand to stop me and trying to shout me down. Now he caught me by the shoulder and stuck out his chin till his whiskers almost brushed my nose. Dark was coming on, and I remember that just then the dog Peter howled from somewhere on the grounds.

"Young fellow," said he with a terrible sort of earnestness that made me think I could see the sparks of electricity in his voice, and that took all the fun out of the fact that he honestly thought he was a man of few words, "if you will learn a lesson from me and hold your tongue till I get an opportunity to answer one of your broadside of questions, why, you may hear something that will save you the trouble of asking any more—any more at all! Just a minute. I have a will and I have an heir. The heir's a maiden lady, my sister Martha, three years older than myself, who lives in Penacook, New Hampshire, is worth about one million and a half more than I am and is going to leave her money to a cats' hospital in Portland, Maine. My only other beneficiaries are similar charitable institutions—but more human—on the Pacific Coast. I can't picture Martha Allen or the Los Angeles Y. M. C. A. murdering me for my legacies. As for whatever else I may suspect——"

He stoped for breath.

"But who's your life-insurance beneficiary?" I cut in, remembering Ben Tuck and my latest financial venture.

Then I thought he was going to blow up. His chest filled out—his cheeks, too. He got purple, and his mouth sagged.

"If—if—if you don't like it here," he fairly bellowed, "get out! Get out, I say! If you ask another question, I'll take it as a sign you want to go."

Mrs. Tyrrell stuck her quiet white head in at the door and told us the fried chicken was getting cold.

It was just that sane food message that saved us. I was as near mad as I ever get, and he was even madder than usual, but we were both hungry.

"Mr. Allen," I said, and then I remembered how Tuck had said he'd let his insurance-policy slide. "I'm staying—on account of the ladies."

"Mr. Satterlee," he said, "never mind your reasons, but hold your tongue—and let's eat."

Well, that's all that happened that evening. Ben Tuck didn't turn up, and I wanted to talk to Kate, but her mother sent her to bed early. Mr. Allen gave me the room over the shed-roof, and, after we'd seen everything as safe as we could make it, I went there. The old gentleman said there was no use doing sentry, because Peter would give an alarm in case of trespassers; so I turned in.

Still, in spite of my bad rest the night before, I only slept by fits and starts. In the first place, I was worried over the women's safety and kind of upset about the way I felt toward Kate in general. I'd been so used to worrying over crops and notes and mortgages for so long that I never rested quiet a whole night through anyhow. I just lay up there with one eye on that window that had only a snap-lock to it, and soon I got to going over and over this case in general.

Here was Mr. Allen, not a multi-millionaire but a rich man nevertheless, who'd beat it out to this ranch he'd bought a couple of years ago and never, as far as I could figure, been near before—a man who looked to me to be as straight as a string. He was too old to have a woman after him, and his reputation for honest

dealing, so Kate told me, was a hundred percent plus.

Whatever was the matter, it didn't look like revenge stuff. Yet, if it wasn't one or other of these things, what was it? He'd probably thought of this ranch as his safest place—and here he was being hunted out on it.

T LAST I got up and looked out of the door. It was two o'clock in the morning—I'm methodical and have a habit of always looking at my watch, if posible, whenever I do anything—and I saw a light coming under the door of what Mr. Allen had said was his room. I'm ashamed to say I tiptoed there and glued my eye to the keyhole; all I saw was the old gentleman sitting up in bed and reading a book!

Again I turned in and tried to tell myself he was suffering from persecution-mania; and then I remembered Smudge Nose and what he'd done and tried to do. I wished Mr. Allen was crazy, but I couldn't believe he was—and the house and grounds were awfully still!

I dozed a bit along toward morning but got up in good time and wasn't much more than downstairs, where everything seemed all right at first glance, when suddenly Kate rushed in with the tears rolling out of her violet eyes and down her sunburned cheeks.

"They've killed Peter!" she cried. "Oh, Mr. Satterlee, they've killed my collie, and he's been mine ever since he was a puppy!"

She had one hand toward me, and I took it. Together we ran out. Sure enough, there, close to the gate, that faithful dog was stretched, stone dead. It didn't take a second look to tell me he'd been poisoned.

Unless you like dogs nothing would make you understand how I can tell about man-killing and yet shy at dog-killing. Kate and I both liked dogs. It was a pretty solemn party that tried to eat breakfast; then Kate and I went out to dig a hole for that collie. We wrapped him up in one of the best sheets, which Mr. Allen himself brought us, and so we put him down to rest, like a soldier, right where he'd fallen in the line of duty. Kate even pulled a few roses for his grave; she didn't let me see her tears, but I knew they were there—I'd been through the same sort of thing myself.

"He was a good friend to me for years," she said.

It was like a prayer, and I've seen a few men buried that I've not felt as much like praying over as some dogs. I told her that.

We were alone together out there by the wall, with roses all around us, and a ray of early morning sunshine coming in through the screen of them and falling on the new-made grave, she took my hand.

"I like you," said Kate.

That was the whole of it, then. I didn't say anything. We just walked back to the house together. But we understood each other now.

Nothing more happened all that day. The women tried to go on with their household tasks as if the place was back at "normalcy", and they made a brave job of it. Mr. Allen spent nearly all his time in his sitting-room on the ground floor, where he shut himself up with the same mysterious work that Kate said kept him there most whiles. Only once every couple of hours he'd pounce out, lock the door and run upstairs for a minute and then rush down and lock himself in again.

"He's been looking through that telescope," Mrs. Tyrrell told me, and I found out he had a sort of spy-glass at a window in the second story hall over the front door, pivoted so that he could see all the front premises in daylight.

As for me, I got more and more worried. Folks that'll poison a dog will do 'most anything else, and it seemed as if those wide spaces outside the bottle-topped walls were slowly closing in on us. I'd have used the 'phone to Guthrie or Equality, only neither Kate nor her mother would let me. So I just kept hoping Ben Tuck would come.

He didn't, though, and things got mighty gloomy by evening. Mr. Allen had his meals sent into his sitting-room and at nine o'clock went up to bed. I did the round of the house a little later and gave orders that all shutters were to be kept bolted and all windows closed and locked, even in the bedrooms, no matter how much anybody might like fresh air. Then I got ready for another uncomfortable night of it, but I must have been more tired than I thought, for I slept sound till something like 2 A. M.

It was the tinkle of a piece of glass that wakened me.

CHAPTER VII

THE DEED

WAS out of bed like a jack-in-the-box when his lid's unhooked, only a lot quieter. I knew right away I had to be quick and had to be silent.

Although I hadn't taken off enough clothes to speak of, I'd got sort of turned around in my sleep, the way you will sometimes, so that it took me part of a second to find my revolver and the other part to understand that the door hadn't any right to be where I thought it was. Then I opened it and tiptoed out into the hall.

The house had four bedrooms, and they all opened off there, Mr. Allen's in front of mine, and across from his Mrs. Tyrrell's, with Kate's opposite the room where I slept. The moon had set long ago, and the hall was dark as pitch, but I knew my way around now and I stopped only to listen.

I wanted to locate that sound. At first I thought I might have been dreaming; next I was afraid I'd not been wakened as soon as I fancied I had.

No noise, except what you'd expect in a house where the inmates are in bed and where there isn't anybody who hasn't a right to be there. The stairs creaked, but only the way stairs in old houses always will, as if nothing but the ghost of some dead owner is on them. I could hear Mrs. Tyrrell breathing heavily but naturally, and a long, regular snore came from Mr. Allen's room. Kate was young and healthy; there wasn't as much as a whisper from her way.

But then I noticed something, a draft.

Now, I knew the downstairs windows were shuttered, for I'd inspected them at bedtime. Upstairs, I'd ordered things closed tight; and I'd noticed the night before that both the women and the old gentlemen slept with their doors shut. Where did that draft come from? And ought I to hear the breathing and the snore so plainly?

I put up a hand—nothing. I moved toward the front of the house; a current of air blew across it, and it came from the direction of Mrs. Tyrrell's room.

Three steps took me over. Sure enough, her bedroom door was open.

I didn't stand on ceremony but ran straight in and along the course of that draft. It came from the window; the shutter was open and the sash raised, and there was a ladder against the wall outside.

Probably made a lot of noise, for Mrs. Tyrrell woke up and screamed. Then, just as Kate came running in, there was a smash from Mr. Allen's room.

"Stay here!" I yelled to the women, while I ran back across the hall.

Somebody was shooting. It was old Aritas, leaning half-way out of his window and pumping lead into the garden. Those shutters had been opened from the inside, and a man—Aritas yelled to me—had jumped out.

I pulled Mr. Allen away and took a look. A figure was climbing over the wall along the road.

By the time I got down and opened the gate the road, as far as I could make out through the darkness, was empty. All I had for my trouble was the discovery that the broken bottles on the wall-top held a few pieces of common cloth, which might have come from the breaches of most anybody in Dedo or Equality.

Back in the house I found everybody partly dressed and looking to see what damage had been done. The ladder had been hauled out of the garden where none of us had thought how useful a thief might find it. An expanding auger must have done the trick for the shutter, and I figured a regular diamond glass-cutter had let in the burglar's hand and arm so that he could open the window. We simply hadn't been half as safe as we'd thought we were.

Mr. Allen was the one who was the most upset. He raged around in a purple dressing-gown and an oldfashioned night-cap as if he were a pirate-king. He sputtered sparks and pup-pupped and never seemed to think it was queer that, if his enemies wanted to kill him as he'd said they did, they had come in here and had the chance and then had run away without taking it.

"I was sound asleep—sound," he said, "till I heard all the screaming. Then that fellow—he was in my room—unlocked the shutters and jumped. After this we'll keep watch all night."

It was Kate who had the common sense. She asked if anything had been stolen, and we all set about investigating. Nothing was missing that she or her mother owned, but soon Mr. Allen, who'd gone back to his quarters, let out a yell from there.

"My valise has been opened!" he shouted.

When I went in, he was standing over a big alligator-skin Gladstone bag. He'd

lit a lamp, of course, and his beard bristled and his eyes burned with the detective fever.

"But there wasn't anything in it," he declared, "except some shirts and collars and a few papers that I——"

Then he made another dive for the valise and began to throw things out of it. He felt in its compartments. He turned it upside down and shook it, and after that looked at me in a way that satisfied me he wasn't holding back anything this time. Whatever was the matter now was a complete mystery to him.

"It's gone," he said, "that deed's been taken!"

I tried to get a rational explanation, and at last succeeded.

"The only thing at all valuable that I brought with me was the deed to this property, bought through an agent two years ago," he said. "I was thinking of a sale. Mr. Guthrie, a lawyer out here, wrote me he had a purchaser in view; and now the deed's gone—it's gone!"

"Was it recorded?" I asked.

"Of course it was, at the court-house in Equality."

"Then what would anybody want with it?"

"I don't know. I can't guess. What do you think, Mr. Satterlee?" He sat down on his bed.

The fact that he'd ask anybody's opinion about anything was enough to show how fussed he was, but nothing came of it. I hadn't any suggestion to offer, and he was soon his real self.

It wasn't till well on in the morning that the next thing happened, and that was something which looked for a while as if it wasn't going to be any help, after all.

CHAPTER VIII

BESSY BOWLS IN

MR. ALLEN had gone to what he called his work; the house-chores were done, and Kate and Mrs. Tyrrell and I were in the hall downstairs. The sun was shining outside, but the world was as lonely as the moon when, all of a sudden, there was a queer clatter on the road and an enormous pounding came at the big front gate. It rolled up to the house like the sound of an attack. I started for the door, but I knew the women went white, and I think I did.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" snaps Mr. Allen, popping out of his sitting-room.

He bounded upstairs like a kid, and I after him. The hammering kept on, loud enough to wake the dead, and he hunched up over his eyeglass. Whatever he saw seemed to disturb him as much as the sound disturbed the rest of us.

"What's this? What's all this?" I heard him mutter.

I tapped him on the shoulder and signed for him to let me have a look. No wonder he'd been puzzled! Of course I couldn't see the outside of the gate, but in front of it, empty, was Ben Tuck's queer tin Lizzie. To him it must have seemed about as crazy a sight as could have appeared in a nightmare, but I could have jumped for joy, for I knew that Ben—cheerful, brick-top Ben—must be trying to get in to us.

"It's all right," I reassured him.

"You know him?" asked Mr. Allen.

"Sure I do. He's a friend of mine. From what I've seen of this part of the country, Mr. Guthrie and the fellow who owns that car are the only two trustworthy men around here."

"Then go and open the gate," Mr. Allen said. "I'll stay up here and cover it till I'm sure nobody else is with him."

I was down in two shakes, and pumping Ben's hand. His grin was worth a thousand dollars, and his Gordon plaid vest was as welcome as the Stars and Stripes.

"Held up in Pompey—" he began.

"Robbed?" I asked.

"Not that kind of a hold-up. *I* got the money; new prospect got the insurance. First million's the hardest—chance to land something—stayed. That's practical. Now for this old backslider——"

"There's something more important than insurance here," I said.

"Ain't no such animal," says Ben. "'Member what Mrs. Newlywed said to her husband when he told her she'd burned the steak? Said, 'Well, we've got a fire policy, haven't we, dearie?'"

He sobered down some when I'd given him all the facts I knew. He even looked what was kind of serious, for him, and promised he'd do what I wanted without letting Mr. Allen know.

"Queer country here. Things like that happen. 'Course the old man's crazy; look at his insurance record. Still, something's up. Got to make Equality today—business. But I'll take your suggestion—tip off the sheriff. That's practical."

I brought him in to the women and fed him. Kate took to him right away, which cheered me still more, and I was beginning to think our troubles would be over soon after he'd got to the county town. Then downstairs trotted Mr. Allen, and the beans were spilled.

I introduced Ben.

"Glad to meet you," Tuck said, pumping Mr. Allen's hand and talking a mite too much the way you talk to a sick child. "Just passin' by. Thought I'd be practical, combine business with pleasure. Your business, my pleasure. Was goin' to show you an endowment idea I had——"

Mr. Allen looked peculiar. "A what?"

"Changed my mind——"

"Pup-pup-p—" Mr. Allen started.

He'd met his match for holding the floor this time, though. Ben went right on.

"'Cause you don't need it. Not with what's happenin' here. Different, your need—another straight life policy——"

Well, Mr. Allen came at him with his blue-veined fist in the air.

"If you've come to try to sell me insurance," he fairly screamed, "you can get out!"

You may guess how we felt. Mrs. Tyrrell said, "Why, Mr. Allen!" Kate tried to put her hand on his arm, but he shook it off. I wanted to interfere against his treating my friend this way, but Ben remained calm.

"If my company's willing to take the risk," he went on. "From the looks of things, you're bound to win," He grinned up at that twitching beard. "Got a new burglary-policy, too——"

"Leave this place!" shouted Mr. Allen. "Leave it right away. Do you hear me? Leave!"

He was pointing to the door. Even Ben got that.

"Believe he don't want me here," said Tuck.

I had to hand it to him; he just bowed to Mr. Allen and shook hands with the womenfolks and walked out. I'd never have guessed he had that much dignity, and I followed him to the gate, making apologies.

"No harm done," Ben said. "Used to it. When they start like that—sure sale later. Wonder why he renigged before. Mental relief—investment—wonder why. Well, another time."

He went into the road and began tinkering with Bessy as if nothing had happened. It was queer to hear him talking to her as if she were alive. Pretty soon his tenor voice was singing a new song to her:

"Come, Betty, we've our way to go,
A day to go,
So don't be slow.
Who said our 'prospects' had vamosed?
We'll business boost
Before we roost,
And then, oh girl, we'll stuff our pockets
With di'mond necklaces and lockets."

He climbed in and shook hands over the wind-shield.

"Don't worry. Keep you in mind. Send sheriff. Probably safe now anyway. Robbery's over."

"But what would anybody want with that deed?" I asked.

"That's to be found out." He grinned. "You're O. K. for today at the worst of it. Don't believe you'll have any more trouble, myself. Know what the fellow said when he closed the house and joined his wife in the country for over Sunday? 'Cat's safe. Left fresh condensed milk can on kitchen table for pussy with can opener beside it.' So long!"

He'd cranked up. Now he was on his way, rattling down the road and singing:

"Oh, Bessy, don't you dare to chafe
About this waif;
We leave him safe——"

I wished I was sure about that.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN-TRAP

STOOD in the road watching Ben disappear and trying to think things over. No go.

Here was Aritas Allen, a perfectly able-bodied man for all his years, stopping at a place he said was dangerous, at least for him, and keeping these women there. Wouldn't let us communicate with the authorities, and Kate and her mother were too loyal to budge without him. Crazy? I wished I could think so. All I could think was that he was wrong about a plot against his life, and that robbery, though I didn't figure out why it should be theft of a deed duly recorded, was at the bottom of this trouble.

There was one comfort: if it was robbery, Ben was as right as Mr. Allen was wrong; the thing had been stolen now and the danger was over. The situation would be up to the sheriff when he dropped in to

investigate. The boss would make a noise when he found out I'd sent for that officer, but all I could do was wait. The danger probably being over, I believed I could risk a ride around the ranch; I had a hunch about that salt-pool I wanted to follow up.

So I went to the little corral and saddled my mustang for what was to be my last ride on him.

As I trotted through the front gate again —there wasn't any back-gate in that wall —I saw a rider coming toward me from the direction of El Dedo. He saw me a second later and pulled up, maybe two hundred yards away, but, without thinking this was queer, I kept on toward him. The sun was at my left and between us, so I couldn't make out his face at first, but he sat light, with his knees high enough to show that only the ball of the foot touched the stirrups; it was plain that he belonged to that country.

A couple of paces more and I had his number. First I got his fierce mustache, then his long pointed nose, next his straight black hair, and finally his yellow complexion. This was that zapotec who'd sat in at our poker-game at the *fonda*.

"Hello, Porfirio!" I sang out.

I didn't like the man, but, aside from his being quick-fingered at the cards, which Dedo didn't seem to count in sizing up a citizen's reputation for what the law calls probity, I'd no reason to class him as exactly an enemy to society. If the danger was past at the ranch, what could it matter, anyhow? I hadn't any idea beyond passing the time of day with him and perhaps getting a word to Jason Guthrie.

Porfirio just gave me one look and wheeled around. I saw his spurs flash. He started south at a gallop.

Like it? I didn't. He must have recognized me as well as I recognized him. The danger wasn't past, then, and this fellow had something to do with it. He'd come out here scouting.

I got busy. That Hermosillo mustang took the dirt like a race-horse. All around me the flat, hard-baked plain danced by; the telephone-posts whirled past. Porfirio had a good lead, but I was on the better horse. I meant to overhaul him and squeeze some information out of his yellow throat.

But I didn't do it. One of those sun-cracks in the road seemed to jump up and bite my mount, and we came down together, a mile away from the ranch. By the time I'd got to my feet, Porfirio was hopelessly ahead of me and going strong.

My mustang was only scratched, and I'd had sense to relax every muscle as I shot over his head. Still, there was only one thing to do now, and I did it. I went back to El Rancho de las Rosas.

I was mad all through, and I picked as my chief grievance the way Mr. Allen had treated well-meaning Gunshot Ben. I was going to have a word with Mr. Allen, several words.

Kate delayed me. She met me at the gate, her violet eyes all shining with some satisfaction or other.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

I told her the whole thing.

"Well," she said, "it doesn't matter. The next one who tries to break into the house is going to be caught."

She took me up to my room and pointed to that unprotected window over the shed-roof, the only unprotected window in the house. It was the one that was to be boarded up when Mr. Allen got through the work he was engaged on; meanwhile nobody else could touch it.

That shed-roof was covered with tar-paper. All by herself, Kate had sawed away the wood from under the space in front of the window; then she'd nailed back the paper over it.

"It's a man-trap," she explained. "Anybody that climbs the roof trying to get in the house this way will fall through."

She was proud of it. She said the boss was, too. They'd hacked up the ladder. They figured that whoever'd broken in last night went for the harder entrance because he wanted to get direct to Mr. Allen's bedroom and had mistaken Mrs. Tyrrell's for it. He wouldn't try the same method twice; he'd probably try this way.

"That's if it's one of the same crowd," said I, "or if there's any second attempt at housebreaking."

"Mr. Allen's sure there will be," Kate replied. "He's sure the man that broke in last night was interrupted by you before he could—could kill Mr. Allen."

She'd worked so hard I couldn't tell her how silly the contraption and all the reasoning about it looked to me.

"Won't you and your mother get out of here?" I asked instead.

She shook her chestnut-brown head.

"I'll see you safe," I promised.

"And leave Mr. Allen?" Those contralto voices certainly can be reproachful!

"If he's so stubborn as not to go, too, I'll come back and stay with him."

"But what might happen while you were

gone? You've just told me about this man you chased on the road."

No getting around her! I wished I'd insisted on packing the Tyrrells into Ben Tuck's car, but I knew they'd have refused. Now I had to put all my faith in the sheriff.

Kate had made me madder than ever at Mr. Allen. I left her, went downstairs and pounded at his sitting-room door.

He sputtered through it.

"This is important," I said. "You've got to let me in."

"Just a minute!"

"No sir, right now."

I began to kick at a panel and he had to open.

I'd surprised him at his work. In his hand he still held one of the many books in the room. I grabbed it—a detective-story! I walked to the table and looked at the names of the books on it; every one was a detective story. Aritas Allen, who thought he was going to be murdered in this corner of America—and I guessed then most likely that was why he thought it—spent his time reading mystery-yarns about crimes in London and Paris!

"Mr. Allen," I said, "you've insulted my friend, you say you're in danger, you're keeping two women where that danger is, and you won't let me telephone for the legal help any respectable citizen has a right to demand. Now then, you've either got to satisfy me, or else——"

DON'T know what I'd have threatened, for of course I couldn't leave the Tyrrells there and of course I remembered he'd once told me I could go anyhow. But I didn't have to make good, for an interruption happened right there that put an end to my little speech. Out beyond the wall came a strong tenor:

"We are 'all things to all men';
We can sell you all you lack;
If we go, we come again—
Bessy always beats it back!"

"Stop here!" I told Mr. Allen, and I ran out.

It was Ben, all right, dusty, sweat-shining and considerably mussed up by what turned out to have been two hard drives and a hot session in Equality. I all but looked under the seat of the crazy tonneau; he'd come alone.

"Where's the sheriff?"

"Wasn't there. Lynchin'-bee thirty-five mile' north at Murpheysburg. Gone to break up the festivities. Took 'most every man in Equality along. Left him a note. That's practical."

"Then why did you come back?"

"This is some welcome," grinned Ben. "Wait and see. Where's my prospect?"

Mrs. Tyrrell and Kate were coming out to us. Kate's mother guaranteed to make Gunshot's peace with Mr. Allen. She went inside and soon brought him, on the understanding he'd be decent if Ben didn't talk insurance.

"Agreed," says Ben "'cept nights. Talk in my sleep."

The boss was probably some ashamed of himself. He shook hands.

"No rule against selling these?" Tuck asked. He went to Bessy and hauled out a lot of tinned goods and a couple of cartons of cartridges of man-size caliber. "Bill due thirty days, but two-and-a-half discount off for cash."

Mr. Allen gave him a startled look. Then he ordered us all indoors.

"What's the meaning of this, young man?" he demanded, once we were in the hall. "Do you expect we are going to have to stand a siege?"

"Got a little to eat?" Ben asked Mrs. Tyrrell. "Hard morning—hungry."

He wouldn't talk till he'd had it, but it was dinner time anyway, and the food was on the stove. Tuck ate a good meal. The rest of us, except Kate's mother, were too excited, and Mr. Allen was so curious I thought he'd feed Ben himself so to hurry him.

"Now then!" he kept saying.

At last Ben had enough. He put down his knife and fork—kind of regretfully, I'm bound to admit—and leaned back and ran his fingers through his curly red hair. He talked straight to Mr. Allen, Kate having gone out on some household errand.

"No business in Equality. All prospects out with the sheriff. Thought I'd give the court-house the once-over. Sure that deed was recorded?"

"Sure?" Mr. Allen rapped out. "Of course I am. I'm certain. I've seen it myself."

"When?"

"When it was recorded, when I bought this property, the second time I was ever near here—the last time."

"How long ago?"

"Two years."

"Too long. Men been insured—died—policies paid—all inside two years." Ben

smiled. "Deeds disappear. Even out of court-houses——"

Mr. Allen's beard bristled. He put up one of his blue-veined hands.

"Pup-pup! Are you trying to tell me ——"

"Let me do it. Said 'disappear'——"

"Out of a book? Out of the court-house? They don't."

"Do out of this one. Yours. No record. No mention of you. Slice cut out of index-volume. Page cut out of record-volume for two years ago."

"Pup—" began Mr. Allen.

But he couldn't go on with it. He and Mrs. Tyrrell—though she likely didn't half understand—and I all sat there with our jaws hanging.

"Your property?" said Ben. "Can't prove——"

Just then Kate came running in, crying. She had been out in the garden and had seen something that sent her to the road. In the corral all the horses had been hamstrung while we were eating, and out by the gate Ben's Bessy had been torn into little bits!

"I've had enough of this!" I shouted, and jumped for the telephone.

No answer. Somewhere or other the wires had been cut.

CHAPTER X

THE TEETH OF THE TIGRESS

KATE was right: there wasn't a horse that could be saved, and Bessy was done for. We were as much marooned on the Ranch of the Roses as if Captain Kidd had landed us on a rock in mid-ocean and then sailed away. We were worse off than that, because a marooned man is alone with God but we were at the mercy of our enemies.

That afternoon's bloody work with those poor beasts is best left undescribed—as are our feelings as we put them out of their misery. Poor Ben was extra hard hit over his crazy old faithful homemade car.

We men had finished, and I was coming back to the house when I saw Mrs. Tyrrell at the gate—and the gate was open.

She was talking to somebody—somebody who was dark and had a bundle in his hands. I was sure I'd never lamped him before, but he seemed to be claiming to be a peddler; I felt leary of any peddler now.

I ran up, drawing my gun as I came on, but he saw me and cleared out. He was on a horse from which he'd evidently just dismounted, and was tearing down the road by the time I got to Mrs. Tyrrell.

She looked at me in that calm way of hers that at times could be so icily reproachful. She said:

"Mr. Satt'lee, yo' frightened that man away," she accused.

"Who was he?" I asked, more mad than polite.

"A peddler."

"I could see that, but what did he want?"

"Why, what on airth d'yo' 'spose, Mr. Satt'lee? He wanted to sell me somethin', o' course; an' he's got some o' the purtiest lace. It would jes' do fo' the edgin' to Kate's new petticoat——"

It was good she mentioned her daughter. I was close to forgetting whose mother Mrs. Tyrrell was.

"Did he ask you any questions about this place?" I tried again.

"Yes suh, he did. Jes' as yo' came arunnin' up so rude, he asked me how many men they were yere."

"And you told him?'

She gave a little touch to her white hair and drew herself up. Nothing could have been more ladylike or innocent than she was when she answered.

"Mr. Satt'lee," said she, "yo' talk like Ah mote be deceitful. Ah've never tol' a lie in mah life. But Ah don' consider it's utterin' a falsehood to tell an untruth when folks ask what they've no right to. Ah tol' him they was seven men yere. Why shouldn' Ah 'a' bought thet lace?"

She walked away with her chin in the air, and it wasn't till bedtime that she'd speak to me.

Mr. Allen, Gunshot and I divided the night into theree watches and then squabbled over who'd stand the middle one, which we all figured was the most likely for something to happen in. Ben said he wouldn't sleep all night anyhow, and I believed him then, for he could just about keep back the tears over the loss of his car. It was pathetic to see how he grieved, the way an artist might if his best painting were cut in rags. Mr. Allen, all on fire with his favorite reading-matter, declared a cup of his own brew of coffee would make him the best man for the job and pointed out that this was his show, anyhow. But I proposed we draw lots, and I won.

It was the dead of night when I went

on post. The place was that upper hall window over the door, and the window was kept open. I kneeled down by the sill, a revolver in one hand and a doused flash-lamp in the other.

No moon, but lots of stars. They hang low there and are mighty bright. I could see all the front grounds to the wall, a bit of the road outside and a strip of the flat hard-baked country beyond, as lonely as Sahara and full of the mystery that you get by night on a flat land more than you can ever get it in a stuffy indoor spiritualistic seance, or even in the deepest kind of woods.

It was a long, still wait I had by that window, the garden and the road and the flat wasteland under the stars all wrapped in the quiet and the mystery of night. Mrs. Tyrrell slept quietly, but at last the boss tuned up; it was one of those singing snores that begin low and rise to high soprano and are so surprised they can do it so well that they begin all over again. That sort of blotted out any other sounds.

The minutes dragged, and I yawned. Of course I didn't dare to smoke for fear the light of a match and the glow of the pipe might be a warning, and I admit I was most ready to doze off. I didn't even know what time it was, though it was dark enough for any time; the only clock in the house that struck was the one down in the hall—and that belonged to the species that sounds one hour and looks another.

The understanding was that the fellow on duty wasn't to budge, unless he heard or saw something suspicious, till he felt sure his spell was over; then he was to creep far back and use the flashlight to make sure. I remembered that our last visitor had called at 2 A. M. It must have been getting on to three o'clock when the new one came.

There was a strange sound. I was sure. Old Aritas had stopped snoring, and in the utter stillness now I could make out the least movement.

I pulled myself and found that my legs were getting stiff. Only stillness again. I was dead certain, though, that I'd heard something, and it had come from my room, where Ben was now. From my room, or the shed-roof outside of it.

I sneaked over. Tuck was asleep, after all; I could hear him breathing regularly when I came to the doorway. At first just his breathing, but, after a long five minutes, something else. It was like the scraping of cloth on that shed-roof.

I wanted to jump out and shoot, in my fear that the trap mightn't work.

THEN, suddenly, plump! Not a very heavy fall, not enough to waken the boss or the women, but it woke Gunshot. He woke like a cat, completely and without any noise. I'd got to the window, and he saw and recognized me there.

"Fool trap worked?" he whispered.

My answer was to flash the electric-torch on the roof. It was empty, but the flap over the hole had fallen inward, and the hole gaped wide.

"Let's go!" I said, and we crawled out.

Over my shoulder I yelled the alarm, and Mr. Allen came into the room before Ben was out of it. The old man had his own flash, and I got a look at him. He never could sleep in his day-clothes, the way the women and Tuck and I could, so there he was, like the night before.

I crept on to the hole. Somebody was down there. I heard a kind of moan, as if the person that let it loose did it against his will. I snapped my lamp, but it had gone wrong.

"Who's there?" I called.

Nobody answered.

When I looked up, everybody from the house, even the women were on that roof. Then Mr. Allen shoved his flash in. We all leaned over and stared.

A pale olive face with the carnations washed out of it was framed in the blinding circle of that light, a frightened, angry face—the face of a girl.

The boss nearly dropped his torch.

"Pup—who in the—who—who——"

"She comes from Dedo," I said, "and her name's Rosalia Martinez."

"Kate—Mr. Allen," said Mrs. Tyrrell, "Ah jes' knew yo' ole trap was good fo' nothin'. Why, yo'-all mote 'a' killed that po' girl!"

I wondered if the poor girl hadn't come here to try to kill one of us and if we hadn't killed her, anyhow; but Kate's common sense contralto interrupted.

"We've got to get her out," said she.

"Right. That's practical," says Ben.

But it wasn't just that. In the first place, when the others had lighted up a bit downstairs and unbarred the shed-door and invited Rosalia inside, she showed she was very much alive by saying she wouldn't come; in the second place, when I dropped through from the roof and was for bring-

ing her in forcibly, she showed her pomegranate teeth and a business-like dagger. She dared me to shoot!

Then Gunshot tried another piece of advice, and a better.

"Women's work," he suggested. Beat it, we three. Let them coax her."

"She might have broken a leg," Mr. Allen objected.

"Then they can carry her. But she hasn't. Not like the cook. 'Member? Mistress told her she was always breaking dishes. Cook said, 'Don't know how 'tis—they always *will* break when I drop 'em.' No bones hurt here. Come on."

The boss agreed, so the women went into the shed. Ben and I stood outside to help in case that tigress attacked them, but Mr. Allen departed to make a cup of coffee for the victim!

At last Tuck nudged me, and we peeped around the doorway. I saw the women were jollying Rosalia. She came out, leaning on a shoulder of each and limping. They got her to a chair in the hall. Mighty beautiful and sullen she looked there, too, though not a patch to smiling Kate.

"Don' yo' fret, honey," Mrs. Tyrrell's soft voice was saying as she worked with the girl's high-heeled slipper. Think of wearing high-heeled slippers for an all-night murdering-trip. "This yere po' girl's sprained her ankle in that fool contraption."

But neither one of our women managed to get much talk out of Rosalia Martinez. She kept her mouth shut and hung on to her dagger—which it didn't seem somehow polite to take away from her—as if it was her best friend.

Rasalia's attitude was that of the politician when the reporters ask him the wrong question—"I've got nothing to say." Only *she* didn't bother to put even that in words. She had us all going. She didn't need food; she wasn't thirsty. Her ankle must have ached, but Kate and Mrs. Tyrrell had it all bandaged up.

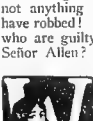
Her pretty tortoise-shell comb had dropped out somewhere, and her blue-black hair fell around her face so that, when the eyes didn't gleam like those of a new mother in the tiger family, she looked like a tired angel. Now she was snarling and now she was pathetic, but one way she was consistent: she wouldn't answer. The clock tick came like a sledge-hammer blow after every interrogation point, and that was all.

Finally, Kate, kneeled in front of her.

"Miss Martinez, we're in great trouble here, and dreadful things have happened," she said, "but we don't know why, or what wrong anyone of us has done. Has any of us done anybody a wrong?"

In the long run you can always bet on Kate. Nobody could have looked at her then and not seen she was O. K., whatever might be thought of the rest of us. Out of a million possible questions there was the one right one to start Rosalia, though I'm bound to say it started her in a surprising direction! She shot her eyes through and through Kate; then she leaned forward and pointed a finger at old Aritas.

"You!" she nearly shrieked in her queer stiff English. "You who thus can walk up and down my hallway with your hands so clicking behind your back and caring not anything about an orphan that you have robbed! It is you—Mother of God—who are guilty! What killed my father, Señor Allen? Tell me that!"



WE ALL stared at her as if she was out of her head—except the boss. He looked as if he was out of his.

She half rose, but I guess the pain drove her back:

"You—you! You stole this property!"

Mr. Allen pulled himself up with a snap. His beard stuck out.

"Bought," he corrected.

"Pah!" She snapped her pretty fingers at him. "With money against my poor unhappy father's soul—may the good God rest it. You think a few dollars can expiate your sin? I know not what threat so terrible you held over his head that would make him sell our dear rancho for a mere song to a cheating *Americano*, this beautiful rancho where my blessed mother died and all my little brothers and sisters—peace to their souls. Yes, I meant to kill you—" her voice was rising toward hysteria—"and I will do it yet! You think you can buy from my father——"

Mr. Allen stopped walking and stood only a foot in front of her. He looked puzzled but not afraid of her, not a little bit. Still, we wondered what use there could be in his explaining anything to this fury.

Well, there was use.

"Pup-pup-pup!" he said in his old way, yet somehow not unkindly. "Miss Martinez, you are mistaken. It wasn't from your father that I bought this property."

"You lie!"

Mr. Allen walked up to her. There wasn't a "pup-pup" left in him.

"I never lie, young lady," he said deliberately.

I thought of Mrs. Tyrrell's similar statement, only I could see that now something serious was hanging fire. Rosalia leaned forward, gripping the arms of her chair. She looked at the boss even harder than she'd looked at Kate.

"Hah! I know you do—I!"

But I thought there was the beginning of the faintest doubt in her voice. Nobody could look at Mr. Allen's face—nobody could hear him—and not believe him.

"I bought this property through an agent," he went on, "and from a man that I begin to think you may have heard of—from Simon Zaldumbide."

Bang! It was as if he'd said some magic formula that she couldn't mistrust or resist, as if the name that I'd heard the minute I came to this country was a club and he'd hit her with it. Whatever carnation-color had crept back to her checks went out now like a candle in the wind. She semed to shrivel up. Her lips worked, but the clock ticked three times before she whispered.

"You—you swear that?" She put her whole soul in the question. "By the holy saints——"

"I'm a Protestant," said Mr. Allen. "Take my word and let it go at that."

He waited for her to speak again; we all did, breathlessly. But she just sat there opening her lips and not getting out a word, fighting with something inside of her brain that was stronger than any of us.

"If you don't believe me," the boss said, kind of prompting her, "ask Mr. Guthrie the next time you see him; he was the lawyer in the business. Young lady, I haven't lied to you, but somebody has. That somebody sent you here to work in his own interests, not in yours. Do you think a man who'd sent you here under false pretenses and let you risk your life would try to save your neck if you were caught in the murder he'd instigated? Come now; we're your friends—tell us who it was."

She found words then, though only a few of them. Her features hardened by sheer will-power. Her face was as proud as that fellow Anchorema's.

"Never was any Martinez an informer," she said. "If we are being betrayed we work our own vengeance. I——"

Then her hands loosened their hold on the chair-arms. She tried to get up. The dagger fell off her knees and rattled on to the floor, and Rosalia crumpled and fell after it.

CHAPTER XI

JUDGE LYNCH

HEN I looked out of the watch-window again, the morning star was shining bright in the west. A cool breeze blew across the waste spaces from the far away mountains; it was even a bit chilly. The road ran white and empty, and the big plain, hard as a cobbled street, didn't show a single sign of life. Mr. Allen had sent me on watch.

"Who is this Simon, anyway?" I'd asked Ben, as soon as the Tyrrells had got Rosalia back to life and taken her to Kate's room.

For once Gunshot didn't grin. "Told you before," he answered. "Client of mine—the devil."

"This no time for questions, young man," the boss cut in. "It is my watch, but I shall have to try to talk more with that girl, as soon as she's herself again. Meanwhile we've been forgetting to keep a lookout. I'll ask you to take my place at the window."

"Don't you think I deserve some explanation first?" I asked.

"Not while the house is unguarded." But he eased up a little. "Somebody—the people that are after me—roused Miss Martinez's hatred against me by a pack of lies and sent her out here. If she killed me, she saved them that trouble. If we caught her, they could come here to rescue her as a helpless woman whom I was illegally restraining—and then they could shoot me in the course of the rescue. Isn't that clear enough? If the girl's not back at their hiding-place somewhere near here by a fixed time, they come after her. Has she murdered me? They'll take her to the county-jail. Hasn't she murdered me? They'll try the spurious rescue. Now, hurry upstairs. We have to have a guard on duty, though I think this armistice will last till sunrise."

Which was exactly how long it did last. The road and the plain got more and more distinct. First the other stars and then the morning star went out. Overhead the sky paled, and I knew that behind the house it was rosy. The breeze quick-

ened, then stopped. The long rays of the sun stretched westward, and I swung Mr. Allen's telescope toward the south.

He wasn't anybody's fool, the boss. From down there a bunch of men came riding toward the ranch. I could see the swing of their long braided horsehair bridles. The cloud of dust behind them showed they were hitting up a pace.

"A gang headed this way!" I called softly to Ben and Mr. Allen, who were still in the downstairs hall.

"Get the guns," the boss directed Tuck. "They're in my sitting-room, under the table." To me he said, "How many are in the party?"

"About a dozen. They're on the gallop. Hurry!"

I ran to Kate's room and tapped at its door. Kate herself opened it a crack, and I gave her the news and told her she and her mother and Rosalia must keep where they were. I wished they were safe miles away! Kate gave me her hand and smiled her brave smile. By the time I got back to the window, Ben and the boss were there with the guns, mighty businesslike rifles that belonged to the place.

"Nobody is to fire until I give the order," Mr. Allen cautioned us. "We can't shoot without provocation. The other side must fire first."

It was a regular mob that clattered to the part of the road opposite the gate. They came along hell-bent-for-election, never drawing rein till they were where they wanted to be, and then pulling in so hard that they brought up all the mustangs rearing. Only three or four of the riders jumped off. These hammered on the gate, but one dropped back to the far edge of road, and I saw his flat nose. It was my peddler.

"Let me get a bead on that hound," I said to Mr. Allen.

"Put down your gun!" ordered the boss.

"He's a murderer; he's——"

"They're all that."

"I'll go down," Ben interrupted. "They know me. Talk to 'em. Talk is my specialty."

Mr. Allen could "pup-pup-" again—and did it. "Stay where you are," he ordered. "This is my house, and as long as you are in it, you will do what I tell you and no more, sir."

Those dismounted fellows had axes. Soon the gate crashed inward. They jumped aside, and the horsemen rode over it the axmen following. Spurs—and the mustangs were halted only at the front-door and right under the window where we stood.

I placed some of the crowd. There was the original peddler, of course; he hung back, snarling. A lot of Oreja-Dedo scum, American, Mex and mixtures, with some I judged hailed fresh from farther south. Fierce-mustached Porfirio was trying hard to boss that wild outfit. And there boiling mad, was proud Felipe Anchorema, the slim jealous young lawyer who'd shot that jug out of Jason Guthrie's hands at the well, now mounted on a thoroughbred.

VIOLENCE was plainly their intention. They roared like a battery of seventy-fives. Then they spotted us, and Porfirio shouted something. They waved pistols; one shot, and the bullet splashed on the wall beside us. Then they all yelled again.

Old Mr. Allen didn't care. He leaned out of that window right above their heads—the fellows in their saddles could almost have pulled his beard—and he poked down his straight nose at them. He'd rested his gun on the sill. Now he raised both his arms.

"Keep quiet!" he shouted.

I doubt if they heard him, but anybody could see what he said. There was something about Aritas that always got him attention; the crowd stopped its noise just as if a hand had been claped over every mouth.

"What—pup-pup-pup—what do you mean by coming into my garden like this?" I saw his head turning right and left, as if he was looking for somebody that wasn't there. "Who's the leader of this mob?"

Anchorema pressed his horse nearer, but Porfirio was ahead of him.

"I am," said the zapotec, his whiskey-voice threatening.

Mr. Allen seemed somehow disappointed.

"Then tell me what you want, right away," he demanded.

"We want Rosalia."

Anchorema gave Porfirio an angry glance out of fiery black eyes.

"How call you her by her Christian name?" Then to Mr. Allen, "He means the Señorita Martinez," he amended.

The crowd began to yell again.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Mr. Allen, and his blue-veined hands stopped them. "How can I understand you if you all talk at once? Now then, answer another

question. "No, not you!" he snapped at Porfirio, and turned toward Felipe. "I'll talk to you. You look like a gentleman. What makes you think Miss Martinez is here?"

Anchorema flushed, but he'd started to answer when the zapotec called out an order that I couldn't hear. Hell broke loose again.

They shook their fists. They howled. The peddler chucked a coil of rope to one of the Mexicans in the front row.

"He's got the girl a prisoner! Lynch him!" he bellowed.

"Lynch him! Lynch him!" they all took it up.

I never had heard that chorus before, and I never want to again. The words sound like the baying of hounds just before they've run their quarry quite to earth but are dead sure of him.

I tried to drag Mr. Allen away, but he held on to the sill.

"Very well rehearsed, very well rehearsed indeed," was all he said.

Our only chance had been to shoot at sight of them. The boss wouldn't let us, and now we must take the consequences. I was scared for him, but I was more scared for Kate. Down below they'd begun to hammer at the front door, and it wouldn't last any time. The "Lynch him!" cries had grown into shrieks. We didn't have a minute. I turned in the direction of the door to Kate's room.

It was open!

That same half-second I knew why. Rosalia had gone downstairs. She'd limped down and was tearing open the front door. Three or four fellows must have nearly fallen in on her, but she stood on the step —and that mob was quiet once more.

I couldn't see her, but I could hear every word she said, and I was glad she wasn't saying any of them to me. She began on that sort of plaintive note that so many Spanish women know how to use; but soon as she'd got their ears she let into that crowd so that every syllable was a whip-lash across their faces.

"You look for me?" she asked. "Behold me, then. Your quest, it is ended. I am recognized—yes? Then I am known to be one who is nobody's slave." It was right there that the whip began to sing. "No matter why I came here, I stay of my own free will. I stay because I want to stay, because these good people, they are my friends now. You hear? My friends!" Bing went the whip! "You fools—can you not understand? I say this —I, Rosalia Martinez!"

I was at the head of the stairs now. I couldn't see the crowd, but Ben told me later that she took all the wind out of their sails. All I could see of Rosalia was her back. However, I did make out that she beckoned to one man, and when he leaned down and she whispered to him I made out that it was Felipe. I thought to myself that, by the look of him, he was even more jealous of her staying here through her own choice than he'd been when he thought of her as a prisoner.

One more slap she gave that crowd.

"The man who sent you here and me here lied to me and to Señor Anchorema. Go back and tell him the Señorita Martinez has said it," she concluded.

The crowd wavered at that, but Porfirio tried again.

"She is forced to speak thus! Someone is behind her in the hall. She is forced to speak thus!" he shouted.

The girl stepped all the way out and well to one side. I drew back, but I knew the crowd peeped in and saw that the hall was empty.

"Am I not a Martinez," she said, "that I should be thought a coward to talk falsely because a revolver was pressed at my side? Look, señores, look well! You see? You are satisfied? She laughed. "You fools!"—and she turned her back on them, limped into the house and slammed what was left of the door in their staring faces.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET OF THE LAKE

IT'S always been my theory that women tell everything they know. Maybe they do sooner or later, but Rosalia didn't start sooner and later didn't seem to arrive yet. I tried to corner her with a question, but she just hopped by me and hobbled on toward Kate's room.

Then I heard Mr. Allen explaining things to Ben with the pride of your real detective, who'd rather have his clews proved right than catch the criminal. The boss had been so close to Kingdom Come that he could have scratched the gates with his penknife and now ought by rights to have been in a stew about it all. Instead, he was talking like an overcharged battery.

"I told you men what the plan was!"

he rattled away. "Those ruffians had their orders and didn't dare exceed them. The girl wouldn't be rescued, so I couldn't be killed—not yet."

"Next?" Ben asked.

"I think," said Mr. Allen, "we shall soon be acting hosts to Simon Zaldumbide himself."

"Then we *will* need help!" Tuck agreed. "Hope the sheriff's got my note."

With that an idea struck my slow brain, and I didn't wait to hear any more. Down to the hall I scuttled.

Electricity's not a thing exactly in my line, but once, in the Verdun sector, I'd been detailed to an advance-post with a buddy whose job was to cut in on a field wire and send division-headquarters whatever information we got. The thing he did then I thought maybe I could do now; so I hacked off as much of our telephone as looked useful and beat it into the garden.

You see my scheme. Perhaps that Equality sheriff was still up at Murpheysburg; I was going to look for assistance on my own hook. Our instrument was dead; the enemy had come from the south—I figured the cutting was done somewhere not so far down there. I'd pick up the break, unbeknown to Mr. Allen of course, call Dedo and try to get hold of Jason Guthrie, if he was still in that excuse for a civilized town. He might find some men hanging 'round who were honest enough to help him help us.

Whether the boss was right or not about the reasons for Rosalia's success with the mob, the fact of the success was plain. The garden was empty. By the time I'd got through the gate there wasn't anybody in sight on the road.

I'd explored the place in detail through Mr. Allen's spy-glass and out of the back windows, so I had a pretty thorough idea of the lay of the land. The wall that surrounded the ranch-house contained only about three acres, but outside there stretched nearly a square mile of property that belonged to the estate, most of it lying west of the road. I was turning westward, meaning to work along the telephone-wires from the ranch side of the trail, when something made me jump.

Bang-ping!

A bullet whistled close to my ear. The rancho was patroled!

My revolver was on my hip, but I'd left my rifle indoors, and this little busybee came out of a rifle and at long range. There wouldn't have been any sense in trying to reply. Nobody was to be seen, anyhow, and I couldn't guess how many other scouts there might be out that way. I'd been seen, but the chances were that what I was after hadn't been guessed. The posting of patrols looked as if the second attack wouldn't be an early one. My best plan was to go right on.

I dropped flat and wriggled, hoping to squirm out of the danger-zone and cut in on the wires somewhere beyond it. The plan looked good, for there wasn't another shot, and I worked on across dry earth, from sagebush to sagebush, till I had the protection of a kind of knoll. Another was east of that, and then another; carefully I negotiated them.

When I stood up behind the last one, sweating from the sun and gritty from the sand, I saw that I was considerably out of my course. Ahead of me was an outcrop of colored rocks and then a little clump of cedar and piñons; at the tail-end of them lay the gray water of that salt-pond that had made me curious the other day. I got to the pond and began to calculate on bearing west again.

But that body of water interested me. It was bigger than it looked from the road, and it was so cloudy that you couldn't figure the depth. There were little hillocks all around it, and it was as desolate as an old battlefield. In my young years, I knew a man who said he'd once owned a homestead next to just such a pool down this way, and he'd talk till he was blue in the face about what was found there. He'd missed a fortune by not taking in that water with the rest of his holdings, and he told me all about it many a time. Also in my chemical classes at the State University I'd picked up enough to know the simpler tests for borax.

I remembered the mule-train outside Dedo that I'd seen from Hennessey's Hill. It may seem queer that I'd think about such things at a time like this, but a man who's worked hard for himself and always kept his eyes open keeps a part of his brain clear for observation wherever he is or whatever's happening. The water looked alkaline. I dipped in a finger and then put my tongue to it—sweetish. Just one term was running through my head now—sodium pyroborate. I flopped right down and made some rapid investigations.

When I raised my face I was excited. I could almost see the old formula $Na_2B_4O_7$ painted on the blazing blue sky. There couldn't be any doubt. This deserted lake was worth all of Mr. Allen's

fortune and then some. It was a regular little gold mine. I'd have bet every tree on my prune ranch and the dirt they grew in that here was tincal.

Once more I got down, just to make doubly sure; but, when I got to my feet after that, I didn't look up into space. There, smiling into my face, his big frame a lazy blot against the sky, stood my friend, the very young Hercules I'd come to try to telephone to, Lawyer Jason Guthrie of Equality.

Chapter XIII

SOMETHING ELSE IN THE WATER

THE sight of him brought me back to myself. Eagerly I grabbed the big hand he held out to me.

"How did you get here, anyway?" I asked.

I was so happy over the good luck of meeting-up with him at this crisis in the trouble at the rancho that I could just about feel the hearty slap he gave my shoulder.

He was sure something for sore eyes to look at. Nothing worried him. His Stetson was cocked to one side of his yellow hair; his bright blue eyes were shining, and his diamond ring flashed in the sunlight.

"Bus'ness kep' me in Dedo till this sunup," he said. "Ridin' along—" he nodded to his horse, standing a few yards away— "I pased a rough crowd goin' south. Thet thar Porfirio headed 'em. They wouldn't tell me what they'd been up to, but I saw 't was somethin', so I thought's how I'd avoid any row with their stragglers by makin' a li'l circuit this a-way. Ef yo' come to thet, ol' man, what yo' doin' yere yo'self?"

You can guess I didn't need a second invitation of that sort. In the quickest time and the fewest words possible, I ran over the high spots of what had happened at the rancho. I hadn't said a dozen words before he began to look serious. He didn't bother me with fool questions, and soon I had convinced him that matters were in a bad way, though several times he frowned as if it was hard to take it all in. I couldn't blame him.

"Does look like it was some sort o' conspiracy," he said when I finished. "Those Dedo boys will git out o' hand now en' then, an' mebbe they hold some leetle grudge against Mr. Allen. He was down to Dedo one time 'bout five year ago. I wonder now——"

He didn't finish what he wondered, but he certainly seemed puzzled about something. I hadn't heard that Aritas had been in the neighborhood before he bought the ranch, but it didn't seem pertinent to go back five years and ask about that when we were in such immediate trouble.

"Then," I added, "Ben Tuck, an insurance agent, turned up——"

Guthrie nodded.

"Well, he joined forces with us, and yesterday that pet automobile of his looked as if a German Big Bertha had landed a shell on it. So here we are all marooned, unless we walk; and they've got patrols all around to keep us from doing that."

Guthrie looked over his shoulder. There was nobody in sight.

"So," he said when he was satisfied we weren't giving information to the enemy, "Ben Tuck's stayin' along o' you, too?"

"Yes," I told him, "and he's got to, now, on account of Bessy—that's his car."

I didn't blame Guthrie for grinning. He clapped me on the back again.

"Bessy," he repeated. "Powerful queer sweetheart, but I'm sorry to hear of the demise. Well"—he stretched himself—"I'll be frank along o' yo'; I can't do anythin' fo' yo' in Dedo; those boys mus' near all be in this. But I can tear on to the Borax-works near 'Quality, an' ef I don' meet the sheriff on the way, I can raise a posse o' my own thar. I'd better hurry; this crowd's a bad lot when they git their dander up."

"You think you can sneak through their patrols? I hoped you could."

Guthrie turned.

"Why not? The boys know me, an' whatever they've got against you-all, they won' set that to me. I'll git past 'em, don' yo' fear."

Then, as he pulled himself upright, he gave me eye for eye.

"Mighty useless piece o' water stuck yere in the middle o' nowhere," he said.

He was starting out on a race for rescue, and he stopped to mention that pool. Why? I caught my breath. The suspicion that at that moment came to me was contrary to everything I'd been thinking about this man and feeling toward him. It didn't fit and it didn't belong; it jumped me without a word of warning—and yet there it was, sitting on my shoulders, grabbing my throat and kicking its heels into my chest. It made Guthrie's voice sound queer.

"He told you once he was interested in land-speculation," it whispered in my ear. "If he knew about this tincal, he might have had some reason for wanting that deed!"

I'm a slow man, but once I get an idea thoroughly in my head I'm likely to act on it. There was a crazy idea there now, but it stuck. I thought about the sliced windowpane in Mrs. Tyrrell's room, and decided that if Guthrie didn't act just natural at what I was going to suggest, it'd be proof there was something about him worth looking into.

"Hum," I agreed, very casual.

Then, as he moved to his horse with a lot of loud promises about the help he'd bring from Equality, I saw a little rip in the seat of his pants like that which must have been made in the fellow's who climbed that bottle-topped wall at the ranchhouse!

"Guthrie, that's a fine ring you've got," I called after him. "I like a good diamond. "Let me have a look, will you?"

I'd reached out; it was hard for him to refuse. He flashed it close, with a yarn about its being payment for a Dedo debt, and he was pulling back toward his nag when I grabbed. I kept smiling, but held his hand, and it seemed to me, without my looking up, that he began to breathe hard.

Then I made a quick twist at the diamond, which stuck way out. It twisted on a pivot—and the pointed base of it was just the thing to cut glass with!

Neither of us spoke. We didn't have to.

I looked up, saw his face had gone all purple and puffy, and knew that, instead of having a frank young giant for a friend and helper, I was up against a bully and a crook who'd carried on his dirty work under a bluff of good-nature.

He looked down, caught my eye, and understood I had him sized up for exactly what he was.

He had a gun, but he didn't use it; I don't know why unless he thought he wouldn't have to. Mine he grabbed before I could get it out, and threw it in the pond. Then he stepped off to go into action.

He plunged forward and made a swing for my jaw. I jumped back; I ought to have side-stepped, for he had the reach of a gorilla. He missed his objective, but his ham of a fist caught me at the top of the breast-bone and sent me spinning.

I struck the sand, but got upright as he was on me. This time my guard was there; he beat it down. A blow just missed my face. I came to him with a smash on his mouth that cut his lip. Then he left-hooked me to the ear, and it was all over. His right followed up, but it never reached me. I was tottering; my foot caught in the sage. Down I went again.

He thought it was a knock-out, and he was nearly right. I was mighty groggy. My eyes were closed; the lids weighed a ton. I kind of felt him leaning over me and studying me. Then I was lifted in the air, my arms somehow pinioned behind me. He threw me away like a dead man, which, taking me to be unconscious, he meant me soon to be. The air whistled in my ears and then—splash! I was in the lake.

Chapter XIV

THE POSSE

I KNOW he thought I was dead, and I know I thought so, too. What I don't know is what really happened.

From the instant his last blow landed every muscle in my body was so much marble; not a nerve had any more life in it than a mummy.

Inside my skull, without any sign showing on my face or between my closed eyelids, my brain thrashed like the piston-rod of an engine when its crank-pin smashes; but through its pounding, like the steam in that engine, there hissed the idea that my only safety was to keep Jason Guthrie thinking this was the end for me. I couldn't have put up an ounce of successful fight when he had me at such a disadvantage. He hadn't a bit of mercy in him, and I didn't want any. I was down; he must be kept believing I was out for keeps.

I got that clear. Then he had me over his head; and then the rush through the air and the splash in the water. At that I did go to sleep. It might have been for the smallest fraction of a second; it might have been for ten minutes. I'm no doctor, and I don't know.

When I woke up I was strangling at the bottom of the pond. There was just sense enough left in me to make me hold my mouth shut so that no bubbles would rise, hold it for as long as I could. By the time I came up I didn't care whether he killed me or not.

He wasn't there!

It was what I'd gambled on. I can't

figure how I'd stayed down while I was groggy, for that water was so full of salt that it seemingly would float the statue of Washington on our State University campus. Anyhow, once my head was in the air and all the air for three square miles around had poured into my lungs, I looked all along the shore. My lawyer friend was gone.

After that, it was me to strike out and make a landing. I did it in double quick.

There was the tramped soil where we'd fought. There was the bit of sage that had helped throw me. There was the remains of the telephone instruments that I'd taken from the ranchhouse, tramped into bits under our fighting feet. Nothing else. I looked across the wasteland; not a thing.

My head was splitting; my clothes steamed in the blasting sun, but there was just one move that it was up to me to make: I must get back to El Rancho de las Rosas and give what help was left in me if the expected attack came.

Crawling most of the way, I managed it. When I struck the road, I squirmed along the wall as flat as a worm. I didn't see a single patrol, and none fired at me; only the furnace of the sun blazed down overhead, and only the empty flats rolled away to the horizon on the west.

The gate was lying the way the mob had left it, and I wondered why Mr. Allen and Ben hadn't had the sense to fix up some sort of barricade. I was so glad, though, to crawl in that I didn't worry much about that. The little lawn looked gay with its roses; my heart warmed to the place, and it was hard to believe what had happened here and what was probably going to happen soon unless help came from Equality.

That was at first; it didn't last long. I was still down on my belly and had just wriggled around the wreck of some of the woodwork, going as quietly as I could for fear of some scout spotting me from ambush back in the road, when I saw a sight that made me stop. Right ahead of me and on a level with my eyes, not ten inches above ground it was.

I'd rounded the gate-post and was off the drive. Between it and me was a rosebush. On the other side of that rosebush stood a pair of boot-heels.

The rear of those heels was toward me; they carried spurs. Now, Gunshot had arrived in a car, and Mr. Allen wore carpet-slippers; and, if this was our sheriff, why was he standing there so still?

I raised my head, ever so slowly and ever so silently. Over the heels flapped the flare-bottoms of Mexican trousers.

That was enough for me. The thorns of the rosebush ripped my hands and face, but I didn't feel them. I shoved right through it, grabbed the fellow below the knees and pulled. He came down before he could say a word, and before he could say a word I was on top of him. A rifle had fallen with him. I rolled him over and got a grip on his yellow throat. It was Porfirio.

By the neck I shoved him into the middle of that considerably disturbed rosebush. There I knelt over him about the way Guthrie had knelt over me down by the pond, but what I saw wasn't like what Jason must have seen. This man's black eyes were wide open and as full of poison as a rattler's fangs.

"Don't let out a sound!" I said.

He cursed me with his eyes.

"Understand?" I repeated.

He showed his teeth as he nodded. His long nose worked like a mad dog's. Even his fierce mustache seemed to be swearing.

"I'm going to ease up on your throat," I explained, "because I can't take you where I want you without doing that; but if you give a single yip I'll hammer your brains out."

He saw I meant it, and, though he was at least as strong a man as I am, he knew I had him. With my knee on his chest, I went through him and relieved him of a regular arsenal, stuffing most of the weapons about my clothes, but keeping out a likely looking gun for guard-duty purposes.

"Now," I said, covering him and standing, "get up and march!"

"Where—" he began.

"Whisper it!" I warned him.

"Where to?" he repeated.

"You'll go in the direction I jab you toward. Did you think I was going to take you back to your patrols on the road? Don't worry about our trail, my friend. If there are any mistakes I'll take all the blame of 'em."

So I headed him into the drive. There I prodded his back with the gun-barrel in a way to tell him to turn toward the house. He looked 'round at me with a surprised face and a Spanish oath, but the oath was barely breathed, and he looked forward,again—walked forward, too, when I gave him another barrel-poke.

HERE was nobody at that upper middle window. I marched my man straight to the door and raised my hand, reaching across him, to knock.

Nobody seemed to have seen me coming; they were keeping a rotten guard. It struck me I'd better give them some warning that this was a friend.

"It's only me—Matt Satterlee," I sang out, as loud as I dared.

Then I knocked. Exactly as my knuckles hit the wood, Kate's voice sounded from somewhere inside, but not from the hall.

"Matt! Don't—don't—" she cried.

Then it stopped—like that. It stopped, or was stopped.

The door flew open. Porfirio tumbled inside and ducked away. Somebody knocked up my gun-arm. Somebody else stuck a revolver under my nose. The mob, the worst of it, anyhow, had come back. So far as I could see, only Felipe Anchorema was missing, and I guessed he had to draw the line somewhere. This lot didn't; they were in possession. The hall was full of them, and I was in precisely the sort of fix that I'd had the zapotec in half a shake ago.

Porfirio was laughing. The fellow who had the drop on me snarled an order, and one of his friends relieved me of the zapotec's gun.

"That is not all!" Porfirio told them. "He has taken everything I had."

They recovered all my recent prisoner's armory, which I had no choice but to surrender. As soon as this little matter was attended to, I was walked to the door of what had been Mr. Allen's sitting-room and shoved inside. A couple of armed Mexicans stood guard in front of it. The door banged shut behind me.

A lamp was lit in there as usual, and as usual the window was barricaded, but I guessed it was as tight now from the inside as from the out. There was our whole crowd.

"Bunch all on hand," said Ben Tuck. "What's your grouch? Been on a spree? Come back to sober up? 'Member what the parson said when the lady brought him a soused man to marry her to. Said, 'Why don't you wait till he's sober?' Lady said, ''Cause he won't git married when he's that.'"

"What does this mean, young man?" snapped Mr. Allen. "Where have you been?"

The boss didn't seem much worse for whatever had happened; he hadn't anything but a black-and-blue lump under one eye. Ben's head was tied up with a bloody bandage, but he looked as spry as ever; and Mrs. Tyrrell's white hair was as neat as if she was just starting out to the movies. Rosalia wasn't hurt, they told me, but she was lying on a couch in one of her deaf-and dumb fits and wouldn't look up or say a word.

It was Kate that I was thinking of. I went over to her. Mr. Allen's question could wait.

"You're all right?"

We both said that at the same time, and then we laughed. I could see by her clear violet eyes that she somehow wasn't worried about the rest; I could see she was O. K. herself, but my clothes were wet and muddy and I owed her an explanation. Mrs. Tyrrell, however, cut in and gave me theirs before it.

That gang had done what Mr. Allen had said they would, only quicker. They'd evidently gone to their chief, got orders to come back and seize the house anyhow, and everybody in it—and they'd obeyed. While Gunshot and the boss were at the lookout-window, these fellows had climbed the shed-roof, where our poor man-trap—or woman-trap, as it turned out to be—hung open. They charged the upper hall from the rear and had everything their own way.

"Why didn't one of you watch in my room?" I asked.

"Why weren't you here to do it?" asked Mr. Allen. "We were just one too few, young man, to have it make any difference whether that window over the shed was guarded or not."

All the same, I could see that the boss, for once, wasn't very pleased with himself.

"What are they waiting for now?" I asked.

"Heaven—what do you suppose?" Mr. Allen spluttered. "At least I am." He picked up one of his detective stories. "Pup-pup pup-pup pup!" Before he died himself, he was going to find out who it was who killed the Duke of Ditchwater in that book. "What those ruffians out in the hall are waiting for is plain enough; they're waiting for their chief's orders to kill me," he added.

"But the sheriff——"

"Don't interrupt me with talk about him. If he'd got back to Equality from Murphysburg at all, if things were going to

quiet down there in time to do us any good, he'd have been here long ago. When you're ready to explain your desertion, I'll listen to you—not before."

He stuck his nose in the book, and I was going to defend myself when Kate pulled at my sleeve. I saw her big eyes were confident and full of news.

"We heard those men talking," she said, nodding toward the doorway. "One of their scouts had been to Equality and just rode in a few minutes ago. He said everything was safe for them because the sheriff was still at Murphysburg with all that posse Mr. Tuck told about."

"Well, then——"

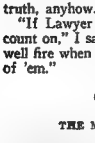
"But that's not all. I'm sure Mr. Allen is only trying to punish you. Not very long after you'd left here, and before this last attack, Mr. Guthrie, the lawyer, rode up. We told him all about things, and he said there were a lot of men at the borax works east of Equality who could be useful. He's ridden up there to get them, and, if he's only quick enough, we're quite certain to be rescued."

Well, she was a brave woman; her mother wasn't any slouch, in her old-fashioned way, and nobody would ever have accused Rosalia Martinez of being a coward. It would be kindest to give them the truth, anyhow.

"If Lawyer Guthrie is all we've got to count on," I said, "those Mexicans may as well fire when ready. Jason Guthrie's one of 'em."

Chapter XV

THE MAN IN THE CHAIR



RS. TYRRELL only shook her white head kind of sadly, but Kate gasped, and that little wrinkle of puzzlement came between her eyes again. I could see Gunshot running his hands through his curly red hair. Mr. Allen dropped his book and jumped up so quickly that one carpet-slipper shot half-way across the room.

He hobbled over to me.

"Jason Guthrie? Did you say Jason Guthrie was in this?" he demanded.

His beard wigwagged at me. I'd given him a surprise for fair.

"I met Guthrie out on the ranch and asked him to get help for us," I said. "Then I found he was the man who broke in here the other night and stole the deed to this property; and at that he tried to kill me. He thinks he has killed me."

"Guthrie the thief? It's impossible! It's contrary to every theory of the conspiracy. There has to be a motive. How did you find out what you think you found?"

Mr. Allen was the kind of man who hates to change his mind. I knew if I answered his last question he'd pup-pup it off.

Rosalia rescued me. All the while I was away they'd been trying to find out what was back of her coming to the ranch, and all the while she'd refused to give them any informative. She kept her mouth tight as to who it was that had stirred her up to murder, even when Kate had informed her, after the second attack, about the other burglar and the missing deed. Now, however, the little tigress was sitting up on the couch, with the dimples working on her olive cheeks where the carnations were in bloom again.

"The motive, I think I understand it. Señor Allen, this Señor Guthrie wills me to have back my property because he thinks to make me grateful thereby so that I will surely marry him." Then she tossed her head. "A handsome man and so blond that I never told him 'No'—but me, a Martinez, to wed an *Americano!* It is amusing, that!"

"Nonsense!" barked the boss. "He's a lawyer; he'd know that if the deed was ——"

I began to see a little daylight.

"You forget the courthouse record's been destroyed," I reminded him. "You couldn't use it to prove your ownership, Mr. Allen."

"Jason's brother's Register of Deeds in Equality," said Ben Tuck; and we saw how the books had been tampered with.

Only the boss wasn't satisfied.

"Hold your tongue!" he barked. "Any jury——"

"Political pull. Guthrie'd pack the panel," from Ben.

"Then the property would revert to its previous owner. I bought it through Guthrie from Zaldumbide."

The boss thought that was a stumper, and so did Gunshot. The women, not knowing much about law, let it go. Still, my head ached yet from Jason's fist and I remembered the look on his face when his glass-cutter was spotted.

"Miss Martinez is mistaken, that's all," I argued. "Guthrie didn't want her to get

the property; he's this Zaldumbide's partner and wants it for him."

Rosalia took that as a slur on her charms and laughed at me rather shrilly.

"Pup-pup-*pup!*" Mr. Allen started again. "There's some mistake about Guthrie. He seems to be a reputable member of the bar."

Nevertheless, anybody could tell the boss wasn't satisfied with his own objection. He sat down, but he didn't read any more. He'd forgotten to retrieve his missing slipper, and some of the electricity had oozed out of him. He was thinking hard.

"Mr. Allen—" Ben interrupted at last.

Interruption was the one thing that could have brought the boss back to his old self, and here it was. Up went a blue-veined hand; his eyes sparkled.

"Just a minute, young man. Can't you learn to save words? If you can't save words, you can't save money. My mind is better trained in criminal investigation than yours, than any of the other minds here." He looked us all over. "I've been working along different lines. I hesitated to speak because I don't like to talk, because this matter has its roots in something I am—ahem—" It was the only time in my acquaintance with him that I'd ever known him to hesitate. "Something I am not very proud of, and because I prefer to solve my own problems anyhow. But now your lives may be slightly in peril—really in peril, perhaps—and it may not be fair to keep you in the dark about causes any longer. Five years ago, when I retired from business, my doctor was fool enough to think my health required a riding-trip, and I was fool enough to believe him——"

THAT was the start of Mr. Allen's explanation. He told us his trip had taken him to Dedo and that he put up at the *fonda* there for a night.

"I had a little money with me," he said, "and a paper of personal importance in my pocket, for I meant to go *en route* to the home office of a certain company and take up a matter of some changes in the final disposition of that document."

It was his first visit to El Dedo del Pie, or to any town of that sort, and he was entertained by the difference in life there from any kind of life he'd been used to. I could readily see how he would be, after quiet years at a desk in a big city, and I was ready to guess what happened when he met Guthrie, who was there on one of his business trips from Equality.

"Asked you to play poker?" I put in.

It almost closed him up.

"Not at all," he corrected. "Mr. Guthrie introduced me to somebody else, and that person asked me to play—not poker, but roulette. Listen to what trouble one roulette-sitting made for me. The person in question was one that I think we are going to meet here rather soon. He resides, I believe, over the border, but he has interests here, and, when they become involved, he sometimes has to make the journey across, though now suffering, I've been told, from an infirmity that he didn't have five years ago. He runs lotteries, he smuggles drugs and opium, and he has an immense hold over all the riffraff on either side of the line, because he has got them to put their money into a sort of society of which he is president and manager. It pays them benefits when they are out of work—and I understand that unemployment is not uncommon among the Mexicans of this general district."

Ben grinned agreement.

"Now as a boy," Mr. Allen went on, "I had played penny poker, and I know I played it well. I always won. I should have liked to show these aliens what an American could do at the national American indoor game. But roulette was new to me. Nevertheless, I won—for a time. Then I didn't."

His confession got harder and harder for him as he went on with it, but he was a game old fellow, and he stuck at it the way he'd stuck at that roulette bout. The long and short of it was that the gang fleeced him, that the gambling fever hit him harder than I've ever known it to hit anybody, and that at last he put up his precious paper and lost it—not all at once, but before morning.

Mr. Allen was owning up to what he considered the one sin of his life, and it didn't come easy. Still, once he'd got it out, he took a sort of pride in the size of the figures involved.

"I don't suppose so much money was often lost at a single sitting south of San Francisco and west of New Orleans," he finished. "At 8 A. M. I owed Simon Zaldumbide and his crowd $25,000, and, because I hadn't the cash and he was what he is, with a lot of his cutthroats around him, I had to assign that paper. It was my life-insurance policy for $100,000."

Gunshot fairly flew at him.

"Just a minute!" Mr. Allen stopped him. "I couldn't make any public protest over a matter in which my—er—fatal weakness had been to blame, so, after all the money I'd invested in that paper for years and years, somebody else was now to continue premium-payments and draw the face-value at my death. Do you wonder I'm sick of insurance? It seems at last that the payer or payers think it time to collect." The boss smiled in a grim sort of way. "There were unsuccessful attacks on my life at home——"

I wanted to ask him why he'd come back here where lay the very danger that he was trying to avoid; why he wouldn't get any but private help? Ben, beside me now, was jumping with something he wanted to say. But Mr. Allen had the floor and knew how to hold it. He raised his right hand.

"Pup-pup, now! Just a minute, if you please. One word in addition——"

His hand dropped. He turned toward the door; and at the look on his face, we all turned that way, too.

The door had opened. With the peddler and Porfirio pushing it, an invalid's chair was being pushed into the room, and in that I saw a creature who, though he was such a lot different from anything I'd imagined, I knew right off must be Simon Zaldumbide.

Chapter XVI

THE SMILE OF ZALDUMBIDE

NOT if I live to be a hundred will I ever forget what I saw when that chair was wheeled into Mr. Allen's sitting-room. They say a dying man's eye photographs the last thing he looks at; likely that's not true, but sometimes I've such nightmares about Simon Zaldumbide that I believe, if I did die in my sleep, the post-mortem would show his picture somewhere on my brain.

White as a leper, long, skinny, sitting upright, turned cold as stone, but chock full of poison. From the waist down, he was all wound around with a blue Indian blanket, and his hands lay on his lap like lumps of lead, but the top of him jutted a full six inches above the high back of that invalid-chair.

Head and face too, he was absolutely hairless—nothing but the tight skin shining dry and chilly on his narrow skull, and on his face no shadow of mustache or beard, no eyebrows, no eyelashes. His cheek-bones stood sharp and high; his cheeks fell in around his condor-nose. His long lips were bloodless, and the smile on them made you shiver. Except for his eyes, the only color about him was in the purple veins at his temples.

It was those eyes that got you—as much alive as the rest of him was dead, alive in a way that set you thinking some fiend had crawled inside a corpse and stopped the funeral. They were sunk deep. They were small and narrow and red from the fires of hell.

What I saw wasn't, rightly speaking, a man. It was a will, and a wicked one. Not a body, but a mind—all evil.

He nodded for Porfirio and the smudge-nosed peddler to stop the chair; the paralysis hadn't hit him higher than the shoulders.

"Good day to you, Mr. Aritas Allen," said he in a voice like silk and the pronunciation of a college professor.

Kate and Mrs. Tyrrell had turned away from the sight. Rosalia brooded on her sofa like a thunder-cloud. Ben gaped, but Mr. Allen's jaw squared.

"Humph!" he snorted.

"It is five years since I have had the pleasure of meeting you," Zaldumbide smiled along. "You did not cross the border to call when you visited these parts two years ago, but you seem in as good health as ever."

A flush came into the boss's cheeks.

"You don't," said he.

"Nor am I." The paralytic's grin was worse than any frown I ever saw. "Yet the chances of life are strange. Insurance-tables—insurance-tables, Mr. Allen—have not half mastered them. For instance, here are you, as sound as an American dollar; here am I, a piece of depreciated Mexican currency, though by birth and education your fellow-countryman. Notwithstanding your apparent advantages, my opportunities of survival may be better than yours."

"It's not surprising you should think I've lived too long," said the boss.

"Then you agree with me?"

"Not a bit. I remind you that the risk was one that you took with your eyes open."

Zaldumbide's real eyes were never very wide open, but for all that they didn't miss a thing.

"Take away these women," he said to his chairmen, his voice beginning to rasp when he spoke to them. "Take Tuck

away, too, and the gawk from Washington."

The way Porfirio and the peddler jumped, you could tell they were in mortal terror of their chief. Gunshot opened his mouth again, but Mr. Allen raised a hand.

"Pup-pup-pup! I insist on proper treatment for the ladies, Zaldumbide," he warned.

While he spoke, I stepped back to Kate.

"You mean you are willing to bargain for their proper treatment, Mr. Allen," the paralytic purred. "That is exactly as I trusted it would be."

"Humph! And if your two servants are going to stay here——"

"Not servants; fellow-members of the board of directors of our Eagle-and-Serpent Mutual Benefit Association."

"With a lot of power, no doubt! Well, if they're going to be here, I want Mr. Satterlee and Mr. Tuck with me."

I believe that Zaldumbide'd intended all along that Ben and I should stop there.

"It is agreed," he said, easily. "Perhaps they will assist me in persuading you. One of them has had a slight personal acquaintance with me, and I dare say knows me still better by reputation; the other seems to be in love with the blonde girl. Let the men stay."

I'll bet it's the first time on record where a man who is like as not going to kill a fellow the next minute has said something that saved the fellow the trouble and embarrassment of telling his girl exactly how he felt about her. If it hadn't been for villainous Simon I'd maybe never have raised the nerve to ask Kate to marry me.

"He's got my number," I whispered to her now.

She squeezed my hand.

"So have I," she said.

Spurred on by the exhilaration of that touch and those words, I walked up to the paralytic.

"The women—" I started.

But Zaldumbide hadn't been doing me favors from choice. This man who was dead to the neck cut me short with an oath that made us all catch our breath.

"Get the women out of here!" he croaked to Porfirio and the peddler. "Get 'em out, you rats! Put 'em all three in the old one's room and set a guard at the door, a deaf and dumb guard and blind, if you've got such a thing!"

I wanted to fight on this issue, though there couldn't have been anything except one end to such a scrap, but Kate gave me a common-sense look. It said every minute's delay added some little to the slim chance of the sheriff turning up after all. So the women were marched off, Rosalia hanging on to Kate's arm. I admit it ran into my slow brain that a fellow would be doing a kindness to the world if he jumped Zaldumbide, unprotected now, and murdered him.

Sometimes I believe that devil could read folks' minds. He gave me a single look.

"I issued instructions," said he, "that one of my men should keep an eye to the keyhole if I was ever left alone with you people in here."

I couldn't answer. The boss wouldn't; and he wouldn't let Ben get out a single yip. A fly buzzed around Zaldumbide, then settled on one of his hands and began to walk across its upturned palm; it gave me the horrors to see that the palm never so much as twitched. Pretty soon the smudge-nosed peddler and scowling Porfirio came back.

"Now," said the paralytic, as frighteningly pleasant as ever, "we can talk quite freely. Sit down, gentlemen; make yourselves entirely comfortable."

CHAPTER XVII

"PLEASE REMIT!"

HE SAT down, Mr. Allen on the sofa that Rosalia had lately been taking for herself; and he looked so belligerent that you'd have thought he was the one in command of the situation. Gunshot looked as if he was going to burst. What I looked like I hate to think.

While his two men stood like statues behind his chair, statues ready to come to life at the drop of the hat, Zaldumbide looked at the boss.

"Mr. Allen, a month ago," he went on, "I had the honor to send you a message all the long way to your city residence."

"Never got it," said the boss.

"It was not a letter."

"Oh, that? Well, yes, somebody did telephone me at my house," Mr. Allen snapped. "The coward wouldn't give his name."

That didn't score.

"He gave you something better than his name; he gave you the number of your insurance policy. He laid down certain conditions and said that you had four weeks in which to fulfill them."

"I told him to go to the devil!"

"Which he did; at least he communicated with me."

"Now then—" Ben tried to butt in.

"If you interrupt again," said Mr. Allen, "I'll ask this smooth-tongued ruffian to have you shot immediately, as a special concession to the laws of common courtesy." Then he said to Zaldumbide: "Though of course you wouldn't keep your word. You never do. Twenty-four hours after that cur at the telephone told me you gave me four weeks, he shot at me on the street—he or somebody else under your orders."

The peddler and Porfirio were as stiff as soldiers at attention, though I believe they enjoyed hearing the little man talk up to the chief that they must have hated as much as they feared. Gunshot, I think, would have given half his "futures" to have a chance to join the gab, but he wasn't allowed it. Simon's red eyes began to smile like his lips.

"Shot not at you—over you, Mr. Allen. There was no intent to kill—yet. It was really a kindness. You had mocked our proposition, but we gave you a revolver-warning."

"You gave me another, ten days later."

"Still forebearance. A man who will not call the police to his assistance deserved our consideration. Such a man, after your proving yourself a true sportsman at roulette, we rightly counted you to be. Next, I confess you surprised me; you came here. May I ask why you did come?"

"Because I thought *you* would."

"Then I have not disappointed you. There are more ways than one to cross the border." The voice was getting smoother and smoother, and all the uglier for it. "The four weeks have expired; we have even allowed you three days of grace——"

"During them, you sent a girl to murder me, the poor child whose father you'd swindled out of this ranch!"

I could see it was a good guess, for away down in Zaldumbide's eyes a tiny yellow flame flickered. Somehow, the glimpse of that stung me into putting in my oar.

"And before you sent Rosalia, you had the deed stolen," I said, without caring whether Mr. Allen liked it or not.

"Pup-pup!" said the boss.

But I'd made even a better hit than he had. Zaldumbide couldn't move a muscle south of his neck; and if he'd had complete control of himself, he wasn't the kind to jump or start or give away, by any such sign, the card you'd dealt him. As it was, he had command of his face, yet it never jerked; his mouth didn't tighten; his eyelids didn't budge. Still, I was watching him hard in the lamplight, where it fell on him, and that little flame got brighter and jumpier.

For a half-second he didn't speak, and just because he didn't speak he almost scared me.

"You mean the deed to this property?" he asked very quietly then.

"The young man means what you very well know," Mr. Allen took the answer out of my mouth. "This house was robbed soon after he arrived here."

There was just another fractional silence. Then Zaldumbide seemed to have made up his mind to change the subject. I figured he was in so deep now that a burglary more or less, discovered among his crimes against us, was only a white chip with him.

"Mr. Satterlee, you and Mr. Tuck have not the sportsmanship of Mr. Allen," he said. "My scouts inform me that you tried to get a message to the sheriff; that one of you found the sheriff was absent on a little mission on which I had had him decoyed, and that therefore a note was left for him. In order to relieve your minds, I may as well tell you that this note was recovered and brought to me. It is here in my coat-pocket. Unfortunately, I have not the use of my hands, but if any of you care to see it——".

"We don't care anything about it!" Mr. Allen barked.

"No? Very well. Then——"

I remembered the lie that Guthrie had worked on my friends and so I tried something like it on the leader of Guthrie's own crowd.

"We've sent for help from the borax works east of Equality," I told.

"I am afraid not, Mr. Satterlee." Zaldumbide shook his head almost sadly. "Your telephone is not working; your party is all accounted for, and when the Señorita Martinez balked those fools I sent here for her—er—rescue, they had at least the wisdom to leave behind them patrols who were to let anyone enter the ranch-house grounds but not to let a soul leave them." He stretched his skinny neck toward the boss. "I believe we have disposed of all preliminaries. Now business, Mr. Allen, business as between businessmen. This bill of yours is overdue. Please remit."

Old Aritas was still on the couch. When he spoke, it made me sorry for him; his voice sounded as if at last the grit was trickling out of him.

"What are your terms?" he asked.

"Cash."

"You don't suppose I've got that amount on me?"

Zaldumbide's face was transfixed in a hellish smile as he answered. Here was a man with half his body as good as in the grave. What use could money be to him? Yet he didn't think of anything else.

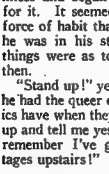
"You can get the money," he said. "It is not for me, it is for you to devise ways and means. If you cannot get it in any other manner, why, really, Mr. Allen, so far as I am concerned, you may write a note saying you are tired of life and then throw yourself into the salt-pool back there. It is nothing to me what you do, so long as you get the money and pledge these friends of yours to keep their mouths shut. But if you *don't* get it—" and here his voice rasped again; it rasped louder, and then suddenly it fairly thundered— "if you don't get it, my men will finish you so that there will be no evidence of murder. Then the Eagle-and-Serpent Mutual Benefit Association will realize on your insurance policy as per agreement!"

Ben jumped forward, but Porfirio stuck a pistol in his stomach. Smudge Nose did the same favor for me. Mr. Allen got to his feet so quickly that his other carpet-slipper came off and he got down on his knees and began to grope under the sofa for it. It seemed a queer working of the force of habit that made him care whether he was in his stocking-feet or not when things were as touch-and-go as they were then.

"Stand up!" yelled Zaldumbide, and now he had the queer cracked voice that paralytics have when they talk too loudly. "Stand up and tell me yes or no! And, damn you, remember I've got your women as hostages upstairs!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNGUESSED FACTOR



WHETHER or not Zaldumbide intended that last threat to drive Ben and me amuck. I don't know. On the one hand, it wouldn't have been beyond him to say something calculated to set us so wild that we'd run on the guns of the guard to our deaths; on the other hand, he could have ordered our execution right out, and I'm sure his men would have obeyed him. Perhaps he just wanted to double-secure his success, or perhaps he couldn't resist pulling any posies of cruelty that happened to grow along the road he traveled. If he did want Ben and me to get ourselves shot down as being awkward witnesses to his scheme against Mr. Allen, he used a first-rate method when he hinted at danger to the women.

I think Gunshot tried to knock Porfirio's hand to one side and close with him. I remember I made a grab at Smudge Nose and didn't much care whether or not he did for me.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" the boss was shouting.

That wouldn't have had any effect on us—but something else did. I had managed to twist the peddler's gun a little to one side of me when there was a shuffling and loud voices in the hall.

I wasn't in a condition to hear the words, though they were plenty loud enough. I could hear that they were some kind of protests and counter-protests, and that's all. Then the door was tossed open, and the fellow who had once pretended he wanted to sell laces to Mrs. Tyrrell backed another fellow into the room, a man with his hands over his head.

He was a giant, and as one of those raised hands caught the lamplight I saw a diamond ring on it. He was Jason Guthrie.

It was too much for me. This young Hercules had tried to kill me at the salt-pool; what could he be doing here as a prisoner? Wasn't he in with Simon, after all? Out of blank amazement, I quite fighting, and so did Ben. Even Porfirio and Smudge Nose lowered their revolvers.

Guthrie's back was turned to the rest of us, but the fellow who brought him in worked him in front of Zaldumbide's chair. From the rear view, he didn't seem much worse for wear than when I'd seen him last, except that his clothes were dirty as if he'd been cached somewhere.

"This yere's a low-down outrage!" he bellowed, only I thought there was a sound of bluff in the way he said it. "Gonzalo knows me 'most's well ez yo' do, Simon. Tell him to put down thet gun o' his."

Zaldumbide did nothing of the sort. Those yellow flames played in his eyes.

"Gonzalo, is the Señor Guthrie armed?" he asked.

"Sartin I'm armed," Jason protested. "Yo' right well know I'm always——"

"Search him."

"Our orders were not to let anybody leave the grounds, is it not so, Señor Zaldumbide?" Gonzalo explained as he

searched. "The patrols had seen the Señor Guthrie ride up here earlier in the morning. Then we lost sight of him. A minute ago I found him trying to climb the wall."

"Thar's a sweet tale fo' yo', Simon. I was jes' quietly comin'——"

"Go out," said Zaldumbide to Gonzalo, "and close the door after you." When he'd been obeyed, he said to Guthrie, soft as silk: "Your instructions did not include your presence here today. You were not informed that we were to be here."

"I was a-ridin' by——"

"And dropped in." Mr. Allen interrupted. "We told him our trouble, and he pretended he was going to raise a posse at the borax works to help us."

Guthrie gave Mr. Allen a side-look, but I was still out of his everange.

"Simon," he wheedled, "yo' don' think I'd do that thar? Yo' don' think I'd double-cross yo', Simon?"

It was exactly what he had tried to do; I saw it all at last—or part of it. He was mixed up with Zaldumbide in some way, but he had a private idea of feathering his own nest. He wanted to marry Rosalia and get the pond, for long ago he'd found out about it what I'd found out today. He'd written to Mr. Allen that there might be a buyer for the ranch only as a means of putting his fingers on the deed without expense.

In my slow way, I got to understand that Jason, happening to meet me while he was looking over what he expected to be his property, had tried to kill me because he realized I knew too much for his safety. Then, most likely, he really did intend to raise a rescue party for the ranch-house folks. If the party arrived in time, he could put Zaldumbide and the rest that were on to him out of the way during the general fight that was bound to follow. The boss wouldn't suspect his rescuer of stealing that deed and slicing up the court house records, and Rosalia, who'd never said 'No' to Jason anyway, would most likely accept him out of gratitude, if for no other reason.

Well, the gang had come back when he was leaving the grounds. He'd hid and waited a chance to go after help; but the chance didn't come, and he couldn't wait forever, so at last he'd had to try to make a break—and they'd nailed him.

It had taken me quite a few days to dope out Jason, but I was sure I had him right now, and I thought it was about time for me to talk again; the wider I could make the split in this gan'gs ranks the better. I stepped up beside him.

"This is the man that stole the deed," I said to the paralytic.

Guthrie turned on me and then drew back. He'd never guessed but that he'd settled my hash long ago, and now, as if he'd seen a ghost, his usually ruddy face went pasty. There wasn't much of the hearty handshaker left in him!

"And he's fixed the court-house records so that nobody can prove ownership to this property," I added, "except the heir of the man you juggled out of it. That heir's Rosalia Martinez. Guthrie here meant to marry her."

"Yo' long-legged liar!" yelled Jason.

He went for me, but this time I was used to his methods. I jumped to one side and let him have a comfortable punch to the ear as he went by. He collided with the table.

"Cover him," said Zaldumbide. Smudge Nose and Porfirio had a bead on Guthrie again when he stood up.

"I tell yo' it's a dam' lie!" he panted.

"It's easy to find out," said I.

"But, Simon, what do yo' care, anyways?" Jason asked. "Yo' got your money out'n the place when you sold it to Allen. It's nothin' to yo' who gits this ranch."

"It becomes of some importance to me when you distract the attention of people with whom I am dealing about another matter." Zaldumbide's voice was silky once more. "I am here to arrange a loan from Mr. Allen—or else to realize on his insurance policy."

HE calm way he said that infuriated the boss, and something else about it made Jason look as if he was going to be sick. I guessed that he'd begun to suspect there was trouble afoot as long ago as when he covered the trail of the cross-road's murderer, covering it, of course, just because Smudge Nose was one of Simon's crowd. It was pretty clear he hadn't quite got around to the insurance explanation till now, when Zaldumbide gave it.

At this instant, Ben Tuck, red-headed Gunshot Ben who none of the people in this room, and Jason least of all, suspicioned of keeping the key of the mystery, could keep silent no longer. He jumped in front of us and bobbed up and down like a cheer-leader at a football game. His

Gordon plaid vest had lost connection with his pants, and his celluloid collar flew open.

"'Pologize. Got to break promise, Mr. Allen—got to talk insurance," he babbled. "Your permision, Mr. Zaldumbide?"

They all looked at him as if he was crazy, but Simon nodded. Then I began to remember something he'd told me. Ben jerked at his vest.

"Then tell me who'd had the job of nursing this policy for you?" he asked.

The yellow light in Zaldumbide's eyes got cold and steady.

"Mr. Guthrie is my American lawyer; he holds the paper for me and keeps up the payments," he stated.

For once Ben spoke slowly and like anybody else, but mighty solemnly.

"You can't collect, not if Mr. Allen dies fifty times," he said. "That policy was closed out eighteen months ago."

Guthrie gave a roar and started a rush, but Porfirio's gun brought him up short. Then everybody stood quietly.

There never was such quiet. Jason's face was blotched white and scarlet, and his big chest heaved. It sounds impossible, but the boss's jaw opened without being able to let out anything. Ben grinned, and Simon's little eyes studied Guthrie. The only noise was the hard breathing of us all.

Naturally, though, Mr. Allen couldn't keep it up for long.

"Well—well—well?" he snapped at last.

"Well what?" asked Ben. "'Member Scotchman courtin' girl five years. Walking with her one evening. At last, 'Jean, will ye marry me?' 'That I will, Jock.' Walked two miles without a word. She asks, 'That all ye ha' to say, Jock?' Says Jock, 'Aye, woman, I'm thinkin' I've said ower muckle the nicht a'ready.' That's me."

"Nonsense! Explain yourself."

It was what Gunshot had been waiting for.

"Thought you thought I talked too much. Well then, when I heard you were here, I picked you for a likely prospect. 'Phoned the home office for data. Practical. Your policy was one of my company's. Company said full cash value was drawn out and policy canceled February of last year." Tuck grinned from the boss to Simon and then at panting Jason. "That's all details the company gave me. I never thought anybody else owned the policy—till today. Today's different. Guthrie is *your* American lawyer, Mr. Zaldumbide, eh? You must have given him blanket power-of-attorney, and that's how he used it. Drew policy's value—pocketed it. If you sent him money since to pay premiums, it went the same way."

Neither Mr. Allen nor I had an eye for the crook's crooked lawyer who'd cheated his own gang. We stared at the terrible figure in the invalid-chair; Zaldumbide looked as if he was trying to get up and couldn't. Nobody could have been whiter than he was when they wheeled him in; yet I could have sworn he turned whiter now.

"Guthrie!" he croaked.

That sound was like a bare knife across the shyster's throat. Jason shrunk till he almost looked little.

"Simon," he begged. He knew everything Ben had said could be proved on him, but he hoped for the one chance in a thousand of a getaway. "Simon, if yo'll let me go to my office an' git thet thar policy I'll show you who's a liar."

"I know who is."

"Why, Simon, yo' don' go fo' to take this tramp insurance agent's word ag'in' mine—not ag'in' the word o' a frien' who's been's close to you as I have!"

"Any day in the year, Guthrie," said Zaldumbide. "And now——"

He stopped, and I felt that what he didn't say was worse than any words he could have found for it. We'd certainly made that split in the enemy's ranks, all right. Plain as day to me, Jason was in bad trouble.

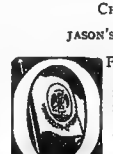
I shivered, and I think the boss did. The chairmen looked interested, but maybe Ben didn't see quite how black things really were for the lawyer.

"You're like the fellow that said he was the big gun in the office, Guthrie—goin' to be fired," he said.

"Jason Guthrie is going to be executed," said the paralytic.

Chapter XIX

Jason's Highest Trump



OPEN the door," Zaldumbide went on, "and turn my chair around to face it."

Guthrie's knees knocked together.

"What yo' a-goin' to do?" he asked apprehensively.

"Let the other members of the Association hear the truth about you, my friend."

"Then—then," Jason tried hard to

threaten, "th-they'll hear somethin' 'b-bout yo', too."

"Open the door," said Simon to his chairmen, and it was opened.

I could study what followed with a mind that wasn't too much taken up with our own troubles. It seemed to me that, with the insurance policy a dead one, Simon would see there wasn't any sense in harming any of our party, and I was simple enough to think that, if we weren't quite out of the woods, we could see the clearing on the other side, anyhow. I didn't half know the cunning and savagery of the fiend who had caught us, as I was soon to find out.

When the door opened that outfit in the hall swarmed up. Men born dark and burned dark, men thickset and lowering, men rangy and shifty, Stetsons and peaked straws, *serapes* and flannel shirts, Spanish mustaches and some straight Yankee mouths; but all looking alike in one respect—all were headed for hell. My own country's worst and Mexico's, they were a choice bouquet.

"Our lawyer——" began Zaldumbide.

But there's no desperation like a cornered bully's. Guthrie cut right across whatever it was that Simon had started to say. Jason didn't pay any attention to his pair of guards.

"The chief's cheated you!" he shrieked. "A month from tomorrow's auditing-day fo' the books, ain' it? Well, the books won't balance, an' he an' the secretary an' treasurer yere—Porfirio an' Al and Zaldumbide are to blame!"

Smudge Nose would have shot.

"Let him alone, said Simon softly.

"A shortage!" yelled Jason. "Chief Zaldumbide hasn' let yo' in on all the smugglin', but he always used the society's money—yo'r money—to pay them Mazatlan Chinks fo' the opium that was to be smuggled! Him an' this pair with him, they never invested their own coin in one o' their own games!"

I judged Al was Smudge Nose. Also I began to get wise to the real activities of the Eagle-and-Serpent Mutual Benefit Association.

"Ef those private deals went through he'd pay back the expenses an' keep the profits. But the las' few didn' go through; American customs men seized the stuff. He wouldn' 'a' used his own cash to make good what he'd stole from yo'-all, even ef it hadn' mos' o' it ben los' speculatin', an' so he risked yo'r lives on this trick yere."

Guthrie didn't look at Zaldumbide or the other men that he accused. Standing at one side, I saw that he kept his blue eyes on those dark faces that filled the doorway, and I saw those faces scowl. So did Jason. A look of hope came over him. He swept his hat off his yellow hair and went on fighting for his life.

"The chief kep' this expedition dark from me. 'Cause why? He was afeared I'd tumble to him—an' luck was with me, an' I did!"

A nasty growl went up from the doorway. Smiling Simon answered it by a question to Guthrie; it was low, but everybody could hear it:

"Apart from this trip, friend Jason, how did you know all about the alleged embezzlements if you weren't a party to them?"

The growl came again, but now a good some of it was aimed at Guthrie. We all saw he must have stood in on at least some of those private deals he'd been so glib about, and he saw it was up to him to divert attention.

"What was this thievin' cripple an' his pals goin' fo' to do?" He played his best card. "Git yo'-all to perform the actual killin' an' then collect the insurance." Like every good public-speaker he had picked out the most sympathetic face in his audience and talked straight to that; it belonged to a fellow with earrings, who seemed to have a fair lot of influence with the rank-and-file around him. "An' what was goin' to be Mr. Zaldumbide's nex' move?"

It wasn't Earrings who rose to that. It was the fellow who'd stopped Guthrie's getaway.

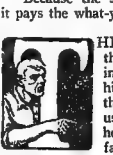
"The chief would have made up his shortage out of the insurance-money," he answered.

"But then the insurance-money would have been short," Earrings cut in.

He couldn't have fed Jason better if he'd been coached for it.

"An' how would yo'-all find that out?" the shyster threw it back.

"Because the society owns the policy; it pays the what-you-call premiums."



HERE Guthrie was handed the chance he'd been asking for. He threw back his big head and laughed the loud laugh he'd always used so well. Suddenly he stopped short, and his face jumped out at them, a pointing finger ahead of it.

"The society holds the policy, and so it

cyan't draw the money. Remember, I'm a lawyer an' know what I'm talkin' aboot. Under the statutes o' this state, the payer o' the premiums on a straight life insurance policy ain't allowed to benefit by the death o' the man whose life's insured!"

The growl went up a third time—and against Zaldumbide. He sat there, his hands the lumps of lead they had to be, his smile the thing he made it. Porfirio and Al itched over their guns, but Simon shook his head at them.

"Zaldumbide never showed yo' po' sheep thet document, but I'll tell yo'-all what it says," Guthrie drove home his point. "It says *he's* the beneficiary! Was he a-goin' fo' to pay it into our treasury anyhow? He darsen't. Ef he did, there'd be thet shortage in the other accounts. He was goin' fo' to stay on this side o' the frontier—goin' to go a sight farther no'th an' east—an' goin' to keep every cent thet the insurance company give him!"

The crowd tumbled. Having been in on some of their private deals, and knowing as much as he did from being Zaldumbide's lawyer, Guthrie hadn't needed much brain to guess what was doing, once he'd learned that the insurance was this expedition's object. Granting the treasury deficit, nobody could follow his argument half-way without seeing he'd deduced correctly—and Simon had as good as admitted the deficit.

So that was the game their chief had played on them! Told them they, as a society, were owners and beneficiaries of the policy, when, as a matter of fact, he was the beneficiary and paid the premiums out of their funds! He could have told them now that Jason, realizing on the policy and pocketing subsequent premium-payments sent him from their treasury by Simon, had in turn cheated both their leader and themselves—but how would that have lessened the chief's own crime?

The growl was a shout now. The gang swept in. Porfirio's gun and Al's too were knocked out of their owner's hands.

I remember wondering why Zaldumbide had ever let the talk run this far. I remember thinking that, even if there was time, he couldn't save himself by falsely claiming the charges were lies and declaring the truth about Jason's cribbing the coin and closing out the policy; things having got where they were, this mob would be as sore at losing through Simon's carelessness as through his fraud. But there wasn't the tenth of a second in which to think.

"Stop!" that paralytic, sitting there like a dead man, rapped out.

That was all. And they did it! At first, I couldn't believe my eyes; but I had to. It was as if they were veterans and their captain had ordered "Halt!"

Then I understood Zaldumbide. That marble body had power, and that cruel mind had vanity. He was just a will, and that will was so proud that it staked its life on itself, and won!

Having been so intimate, Guthrie ought to have counted on this. He didn't, though. He went wild.

"What are yo' afeared of?" he yelled. "This yere crook cayn't raise a finger!"

They knew that, but they were afraid. Simon closed his mouth, and his face looked like a death's head, smiling, only that yellow flame showing in his deep-sunk eyes. Anyone of them could have killed him with a half a crack, and yet, hate him as they did, nobody dared try. That gang of border buccaneers wilted; their jaws dropped; their hands went down; they shuffled. Living or dead they'd have feared him. If I needed anything to prove that Zaldumbide had been a hundred per cent. devil, here it was—and then some.

"Since you have obeyed me, I shall reward you," his silky voice resumed. "I meant to expose Jason, who is what he says I am; but it would be a waste of words. Presently I shall order him killed, and you will do it. However, money first of all. There seems to be some doubt in your minds as to whether you would get the insurance-payment in the event of Mr. Allen's death. Very well, he need not die. We shall take him and his party over the border to our little nest in the mountains. There I think we can find means to induce him to send for a ransom that will make up all deficits and pay us as much to boot as the questionable policy. I think we can induce him—especially as his party includes some ladies."

CHAPTER XX

RAT-IN-A-CORNER

FEW minutes ago I'd thought that Kate and the rest of our party were about out of the woods! Now we were as deep in trouble as ever, and maybe deeper. I saw it, and Ben did too. At best, we'd had a kind of reprieve, which was over.

"Hold up! Wait a minute!" The boss

was trying again to keep the bits in our mouths.

Nobody heard him. I believe I had some wild idea of fighting a way upstairs, by bare fists and quick feet, so that we could all be killed together there and at once. I bucked the crowd; Gunshot beside me.

Of course we couldn't gain a yard. They were on top of us in a heap, and then, three of them to each of us, we were held with our arms pinned behind us.

Guthrie hadn't been thinking about anybody but himself. He had his own life on his mind, and that life must have looked pretty short to him.

"Yo' bunch o' yallow cowardly curs!" he snarled at the gang.

He had a fine line of curses, and he turned it loose; a sewer would have looked pure H_2O to it. He was just about crazy from fear.

The man with the earrings, the very fellow Jason had nearly persuaded a little while before, laughed at him.

"What of Señor Guthrie himself?" he taunted. "Why did not he kill the chief?"

My guards had me tight, but I could get a full view of Simon. His white face looked as if the paralysis had climbed to his head, only I noticed that his smile was a mite uglier.

All that crowd of border-scum took up the laugh at Guthrie. It was a mob verdict, an agreement with what Zaldumbide had said; it told Jason that he was right there with the goods when he figured he hadn't long to live.

Then he did go crazy, the way his sort can—and no other sort. It was the rat-in-a-corner horror of sure and certain death that is bad enough to watch and must be the worst thing in the world to feel. When a brave man fights in the last ditch, knowing he'll never leave it, there is something splendid; but what got hold of this shyster was tooth-and-claw stuff—animal frenzy. His side teeth showed like a dog's; not battle was in his blue eyes, but murder.

"By God, I will kill the chief!" he shouted.

His thick arm flew out. His ring flashed. Before anybody could guess it, that giant's fingers were around the paralytic's throat.

Something snapped. I wished I'd looked away. Simon Zaldumbide's white face was still smiling, but his soul had gone where he must have sold it long ago.

Guthrie drew back. He faced the gang, and the gang stood there trying to realize the thing that had been done. What they would have done nobody ever knew, for they hadn't a chance to do anything.

Shots from the road! Horses' hoofs pounding. Patrols running up, bloody. A rush in the hall. The fellows that held me turned me loose—with nowhere to go! A wave of men, some still mounted and riding right into the house, right into the room, sweeping past the dead Simon, but pushing the rest of us—Guthrie, Porfirio, Smudge Nose, Ear-rings, Ben, the boss and me, enemies and friends together—around the table and against the barred window at the rear!

Clean men, the invaders were, looking mostly like Americans, and all but one strangers to me. Their leader was the proud, dapper, dark Felipe Anchorema, the lover of Rosalia, he who'd come here with the first mob and now——

What did it mean? At this minute he was against the gang. That other time he must have been as much against them, driven to pretense through jealous anxiety for the girl and finally reassured by her whispered word at the doorway.

"Hands up!"

The new crowd had us all covered; they were a little army. Everybody did as told—except, of course, Mr. Allen. He crawled under the sofa, and I thought he was afraid, but right away he came back with a fistful of wire.

"That's my electric signal and private telephone for this posse." he proudly answered the question-mark that I called my face. "I made my last use of it by pressing a button a few minutes ago when I 'hunted for a slipper.' I installed it the night of my arrival and grounded the wires to a hollow half-a-mile back."

"Where these wild-men were waiting?"

"Pup-pup-pup! Young fellow, you musn't call Federal Secret Service operatives wild-men."

I looked at Felipe. By now he's an important person in a Government position, and I don't want to say anything against him, but it did seem to me he was having a mighty hard time not to squeeze his index-finger a little tighter on the trigger of the gun that he leveled at Jason Guthrie.

"Even Anchorema?" I asked the boss.

"I have friends in the Department," he said. "Mr. Anchorema's brand of Mexican blood makes him as good an American citizen as you are. He is going to be the next Federal prosecuting attorney for this district."

HERE was plenty of time for us while those Secret Service folk were handcuffing the prisoners. Nobody was allowed to leave—as I found out when I tried to look after the women, who, I was told, were all right. Ben was trying to insure Felipe. So the boss could talk as much as he liked.

It was time he made an explanation, and he did. He loved it!

"I'd always read all I could about detective work," he said. "Every business-man does; it's a good form of recreation. When I retired from business, I went farther; I took up the profession—" he was proud as a boy with a policeman's helmet—"seriously, my young friend, seriously. I had my Washington acquaintance make me a special agent of his department. Well, my first case was my own! Those threats from Zaldumbide gave me my opportunity to rise in the service.

"I'd heard he was conducting the best organized opium and whisky-smuggling business anywhere along the border, so, when he got after me for the amount of my policy, I thought of drawing him into a trap. I deduced—*déduced*—that he'd come this far if I didn't seem too anxious. Ordinary detective reasoning demonstrated he would. It's very simple—when you know how; and I've made a study of it. Do you see?"

I did. I hadn't said it wasn't simple, but then it *wasn't;* in a man of his age, it was quite amazing. What he said explained the queer things I had thought all along ailed him; it explained almost everything.

"If you had this crowd nearby," I asked, "why did you want somebody else in the house?"

"On acount of the women, of course—and Anchorema wouldn't reduce his force by one man. Zaldumbide's people must have tapped the mails and been on the lookout; they had the Dedo postmaster with them. That was the only thing I hadn't counted on, that and the deed-theft and Guthrie here. They bothered me for a while—almost as much as everybody's wanting to spoil my plans by calling in stupid and perhaps corrupt local authorities. I was determined to solve this case in my own way and by my own efforts."

He thought he had; he didn't really count Felipe and Felipe's men. He was proud as a boy with a policeman's helmet.

"I have shown," he wound up, "that I have the makings of a high-class investigator in me. I propose to devote all the rest of my life to the profesion—all of it."

If we couldn't look after the women, they could satisfy their curiosity about us and all that had been going on down here. Their guard, I found later, had run at the first sign of trouble. Now Rosalia walked in, and I'm bound to say she took the sight of Simon's body mighty coolly. She did look at it, but then she walked right up to Felipe. Ben saw the look in her eyes and fell away.

"Did you this?" she asked of Anchorema, nodding her stack of blue-black hair toward the invalid-chair. "As he has tricked my father, so has he tricked me. He sent me here to kill Señor Allen for what, in truth, he—Zaldumbide—had himself done. It was for me, Rosalia Martinèz, my father's daughter, to kill him! Did you thus prevent me?"

We saw him shake his head, and saw her slip him a slim brown hand.

"I'll give them this ranch for a wedding present," said Mr. Allen.

So far as the existing records went, it was hers already. But that didn't bother the boss; he was going to give it to her anyhow! When I told him about the borax, he pup-pupped and said that was so much the better.

Then Ben came across the room and caught Mr. Allen on his hightide—and reinsured him on that new-fangled annuity plan of Ben's own! The loss of Bessy had taken all the song out of Gunshot for a while, but his sucess with Mr. Allen must have put fresh heart into him. A minute or two after this, his good old tenor was at it again:

"If Volstead's law was not the rule,
Or if I didn't fear White Mule,
I'd drink the health in half a gallon
Of my new risk, this Mr. Allen.
He proves the saying, there's no doubt:
'You may be down, but never out.'
At forty most folks think they're done—
He's starting life at seventy-one!"

Then the red-headed goat grabbed me.

"When I drew your application you didn't know your beneficiary's name—wife's name. Know it now?" he demanded.

"Oh, shut up!" I said. "I'm on my way to find out."

For they'd just told us, the last of the

prisoners being tied up, that we could leave the room at last.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LONGEST CHAPTER OF ALL

HAT happened next is worth a reserved-seat to itself. I found Kate in the garden, all right. She wasn't the kind to want to see what had been going on. She was out there with her mother, and I even got rid of Mrs. Tyrrell by telling her Mr. Allen was asking for her.

Then I was stumped. In spite of what had happened when Simon Zaldumbide said I was in love with Kate, I lost my nerve. All of a sudden I didn't see why she should keep on caring for me, now that the excitement and danger were over, no matter what she'd said inside there when it looked like good-night for the lot of us. I couldn't say a word.

But Kate could. Her violet eyes were all shiny. Her lips trembled, but she spoke right up.

"I've still got your number, Matt," she said.

She's got it yet, and always will have. So that's why this is such a long chapter; there isn't going to be any end to it "till death us do part."

The Explorations of Col. Hugh Glenn

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

IN THE fall of 1821, Col. Hugh Glenn and his party set out from his trading post, located on the Verdigris River (Okla.) about a mile above its mouth, bound for the Rocky Mountains. The party consisted of about twenty men, mounted on horses, and they had a train of pack mules to carry their supplies and trade goods. They went up the valley of the Verdigris, gradually bearing more to the west, reached the Arkansas River near the Cherokee Strip and followed it, more or less closely, to the site of the present city of Pueblo, Colo. Here some of the party built a log house, while the others followed the established trail through Sangre de Cristo Pass into the valley of Taos and down to Santa Fe.

The party left on the site of Pueblo trapped and hunted, going up Boiling Spring River. After three or four weeks of this they followed the main party and went on to Taos over the same trail, trapping on several streams in that valley and working up to the headwaters of the Rio Grande and into Wagonwheel Gap.

They seemed to have missed the remains of Pike's stockade, erected by that explorer in 1807. Had they gone but a few miles farther northwest over the mountain ridge they would have come upon tributaries of the Gunnison River, on the west side of the Continental Divide. Returning to Taos, they joined the other party and started for home over Taos Pass, leaving it at an angle that brought them to the upper waters of the Canadian, which they crossed and then went eastward along the divide between the Cimarron and the Arkansas until they struck Two Butte Creek, which they followed down to the Arkansas. From here they followed down the Arkansas, practically along their out-bound trail, until about half-way down the eastern leg of its great bend, when they struck off easterly and away from it, traveling in a great arc across southeastern Kansas, bearing steadily more northward, and ended their long trip at Ft. Osage, where some of them went on to St. Louis.

By following the eastern leg of the big bend of the Arkansas, they were taken miles out of their way; had they left it at its apex, near the site of the present city of Great Bend, Kansas, they would have gone along the line made famous within a year or two as the old Santa Fe Trail. The log house built by them on the upper Arkansas was the first habitation to be erected and occupied on the site of Pueblo, Colo.

THE FRONTIER CABIN AS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

By ERNEST THOMPSON SETON

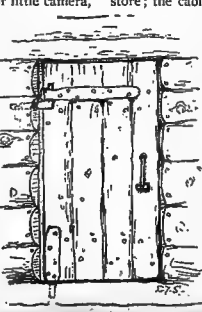
A YOUNG photographer had a camera worth twenty dollars. Out on a trip, he broke the shutter, and yet repaired it himself with no tools but a jack-knife. Then the bellows leaked and was saved with some pine gum and a scrap of coat lining. So he got his pictures, and he began to like that cheap camera. When again at home, he invented for it a finder and an extension, which made it much more useful. Now he fairly loved that poor little camera, and rated it at double its market price. Why? Because he had put himself into it. It had become a part of his life and thought.

About five years ago, a new Y. M. C. A. camp was being planned. The director consulted me on the subject of tents. He could get new tents with fly for $160, and these would accommodate eight men each. If double-decked cots, etc. were added, it made the cost $250 each. How did it strike me?

I replied at length: "Here you have eight young men, all more or less athletic, none with any cash to spare; and you propose to give them a two-weeks outing in a $250 tent that will be useless in five years at farthest. I should say it is all wrong."

"What would you do?" he asked.

"A frontier or woodcraft cabin," was my answer. "In one week and at a maximum cost of $25, I can build a cabin that will hold eight men comfortably, and will last fifty years. And last and best, the tent is a mere thing out of a department store; the cabin that you build yourself is a precious experience."



"If one could do it in a week, couldn't two do it in three days?" he replied.

"Yes."

"Then I call your bluff. I dare you to prove it, and I will go along as your aide."

So we assembled at the chosen camp-ground on the Blue Ridge in North Carolina, equipped with axes, hammers and saws, nails and roofing paper.

Dead chestnut was plentiful. We began by cutting twelve posts, 8 inches thick and 8½ feet long for uprights; five poles 20 feet

long and about 6 inches thick, one for ridge, two for purlines, and two for plates; also four poles of 4-inch diameter and 13 feet long for stringers.

The ground plan was 12 by 18 feet inside, or 13 by 19 outside. We set the twelve posts 2½ feet in the ground, 5 feet apart on the sides and 4 feet on the ends. These stood 5½ feet out of the ground. The stringers laid across the tops of these, raised the height to 6 feet, and the plates on these made an inside height of 6½ feet at the eaves.

The four stringers, one at each end and two across, carried short struts on which ridge and purlines rested firmly, and now the frame was up.

Meanwhile two cords of hemlock slabs had been bought from a neighboring mill at a cost of ten dollars. These we laid on the roof from peak to eaves, flat side down. The upper or rounded side was freed of any sharp snags. The rubberoid roofing paper was nailed on and carefully pressed down into the dip between each slab, so the roof was all in deep ridges from top to bottom.

The outer walls were closed in with slabs nailed horizontally on the posts, and with round side out.

The windows were merely openings with shutters of slabs. The door was of slabs with hinges of hickory, as in the drawing, the hook of the top hinge being a naturally forked branch.

A carpenter from the nearest village came looking for a job. He sat and smoked in contemptuous silence as he witnessed the nailing of our crude timbers, but when he saw the slab door turn perfectly on its backwoods hinges, his ejaculated, "Hell, it works!" was an ample offset to all his contempt.

I could have bought a door latch in town for thirty cents, but I preferred a wooden latch which took an hour or more to make. It was on the inside, but worked with a string from outside, and at night, to lock the door, one had merely to pull in the string. I wanted to seize on and utilize the magic and meaning of the old saying, "The latch string is out for you." I wanted all the force of memory and tradition in my wooden latch—and I got some of it, at least.

The beds were made of hickory saplings, one inch thick, resting lengthwise on cross pieces of chestnut. The lower bunk was one foot from the ground, the upper one three feet higher. Over each at the foot, was a rack for a dress-suit case.

The floor was mud, smooth, leveled, watered, and hammered hard.

At first, I was tempted to do without nails—to use oak pegs which can be driven through chestnut and spruce. It would have made our cabin wholly of wildwood material. But it would have trebled the labor and been less durable, so I compromised on the nails as on the roofing paper.

The finishing feature was the fireplace. A sheet stove would have been far cheaper, easier to cook on, and more equally warm on chilly nights. But where would have been the ancient magic of the open fire, the consecration of wood smoke, the smell of sputtering pine knots? All the best old instincts of our race are ready to respond to those hallowing smells. At no price would I be without their power.

Last, I took a pot of white paint and of yellow, and a pot of roof tar, and splashed the crude roofing paper abundantly. Then I pelted the wet paint with soot, ashes, moss, and muck, so that it melted grayly into the background of trees and rocks.

Our cabin was finished. It had taken us a little over three days. Here is the expense account, not reckoning our labor:

2 cords of slabs (2 loads, about 100 slabs)	$10.00
3 rolls of rubberoid roofing paper at $2.00	6.00
10 lbs. 5" nails, 10 lbs. 4" nails, 5 lbs. 3" nails	2.00
2 bags of cement for fireplace	2.00
1 load sand	1.00
Odds and ends	4.00
	$25.00

And what had we got? Something out of the woods, conquered out of the woods by ourselves, a mixture of nature and human enthusiasm, a something which we could not but love, for it was part of ourselves.

We had contacted the wild woods at almost every point without any intermediary. The mails and the paper were the sole exceptions, and to have given this up would have been costly as well as unpractical. So we accepted them, just as we had also to accept the tools which we brought.

What was its effect on the campers—its spiritual power? Its eight bunks were filled at once, and there was an eager waiting list, so that we had to limit the time each might enjoy the cabin, although the

alternative in this case was a comfortable modern hotel.

The instinctive joy it gave was seen in such expressions as:

"The real old thing."

"Everything in it was got in the woods."

"Look at those timbers!"

"Honest to God, ain't they!"

"Say, boys, I start one as soon as I get home."

"The smell of those logs make me feel like a kid again."

"I tell you it is good to sit by that fire and know that it is all real, that you are in a real cabin in the real woods."

And, had these men built it themselves, their pleasure would have been tenfold and life-long.

Could you have gotten any such thrills or memories, or precious contact with the woods, in a factory-made tent, bought in a department store, smelling of mothballs and varnish, without one feature of color or beauty, without romance or memory, and established only because it was less trouble?

A RELIC OF THE CHEROKEES

IN THE first quarter of the Nineteenth Century the Cherokee Nation occupied a mountain domain that included western North Carolina, northern Georgia, northeast Alabama, east Tennessee and a portion of Kentucky. New Echota, the capital, was located on the Oostanaula River near where Calhoun, Georgia, now stands.

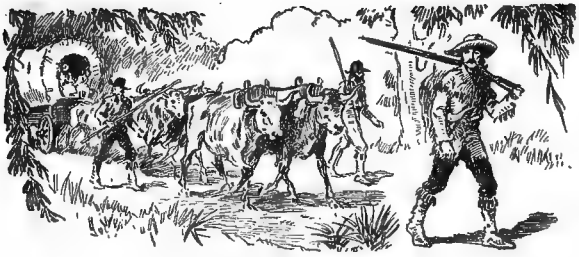
The Cherokees were distinguished from all the other Indian tribes in that they had adopted a distinctive alphabet invented by Sequoyah, a halfbreed known to the whites as George Guess. They had a written constitution, printed school books in their own tongue, adopted a public school system, and, when they were removed to the West in 1837-8, the majority could read and write. A census taken by the U. S. Army at the time of the removal discloses that the fourteen thousand Cherokees taken from this territory had more than eleven hundred negro slaves.

Since the Indians had no system of individual ownership of land, it might seem that they could not have used slaves to advantage. In fact many of the chiefs, most of whom at that time were of mixed blood, had arrogated to themselves the use of large areas of the most fertile lands, had built comfortable homes and were engaged rather extensively in agriculture. Some of them had educated their sons at the State universities, and a few had gone to the best Eastern colleges.

The old home of Joseph Vann, one of the most influential of the Cherokee chiefs, is still standing at Spring Place, Georgia. Including basement and attic, it is four stories high. It was built in 1806 and it is said the brick were imported from England and hauled overland the three hundred miles from Savannah.

This historic old house has been the scene of many stirring episodes, the last of which was both pathetic and tragic. It occurred in 1834, following the lottery for the disposal of the Cherokee lands, when a pitched battle was fought for its possession. One W. M. Bishop had drawn the twenty-three lots possessed and claimed by Joseph Vann. The latter undertook to restrain Bishop in the courts, but failed. The home was then barricaded and manned for a siege, but the troops, commanded by a brother of Bishop, set it on fire and forced its defenders to surrender.

When the flames were extinguished the members of the family emerged and made their sorrowful way over the snow-covered ground to Tennessee, later to join the caravan to the West.—J. A.



RED STICKS

By ANTHONY M. RUD

Better than any other guide Samuel Dale knew the Southern fastnesses of the Cajans; and well he knew that the sinister red sticks meant a frontier closed impassably.

LESS than two miles of the cypress swamp had been traversed since the dawn fires, yet a hazy sun which drew steam from the spongy flat had reached the nodding pine tops of the ridge which had been the last encampment of the settlers. In the sultry heat of a May morning near the Great Bend of the Tombigbee River, a querulous uproar rose from the wagons. Babies squalled. Men and women chattered or snapped the long drawn impatience of their strained nerves.

Four leagues more? That had seemed no more than one last dawn-to-dark of toilsome striving. And so it would have been in the flat woods through which much of their journey had been made. Here, with marshy hills and still more boggy branches dividing the hills, forward progress of the heavy train assumed the aspect of a man-made miracle.

Gory to their shoulders from flounderings in the ferrous muck, the Piedmont oxen puffed and stodged forward against their creaking yokes. Dull things and patient, slow giants; *spacking* their hooves into the mire, *chuk-chukking* against occasional outcroppings of shale, deigning no more than a stare of uninterest toward the coral menaces in coils which occasionally slithered from their paths.

Coral moccasins. Spotted moccasins too fat to move or even to strike effectively at any target more than three inches from the mire. Ten-foot whipsnakes, raising their toothy, unvenomous heads a full yard from the palmetto, astonished and half-belligerent. Marshmallowy rattlers with ugly heads like beef hearts; ferocious serpents whose necks can be broken by the lightest flick of a rawhide lash. Black racers, not dangerous to man but no more afraid of him than if he were a quail—or an alligator. And through the breathless, silent swamp an occasional heavy splash as a bull alligator sank to inspect his cache of carrion.

Terror of this awesome portal to their land of promise attacked the women of the train and even some less hardy of the men. They glanced affrightedly into the occasional tunnels of gnarled Spanish oak where motionless gray stalactites of moss hung from great heights to brush the wagon-tops, then oscillate like slow, sinister pendulums. They tried to pierce the tangles of endless chah'tah rose, anise, holly, tamarack, cypress, and wild huckleberry. They questioned and complained, first addressing one another, then flinging querulous demands at the heavy-shouldered, silent man who led the train; lastly screaming at him until he turned perforce with his grave gesture commanding silence!

Long since Samuel Dale would have forfeited gladly his fee as scout and guide to be quit of these fools with their inces-

sant bickerings and dissatisfactions. Once or twice he had been upon the point of quickening his pace to that stride of silence which was his forest gait when unhampered by duties to others. Each time he had restrained the hot-headed impulse, though at one camping—where now stands the thriving town of Andalusia, Alabama—he had laid aside flintlock, powder-horn, knife, and deerskin shirt to thrash a loud-mouthed dissenter who stood a half head taller than Dale.

For several days that discipline had sufficed. Now that they neared the end of their journey, had entered the country of the Cajans to which they had insisted upon being led in spite of Dale's terse warnings, they became insubordinate—and worse. They forgot that this choice had been made against the advice of a man who knew the piney-woods better than any other white man in the world. Dale had advised them to make their destination either the Coosa or Tallapoosa River. The land there was more fertile. There were fewer Indians, and no Cajans.

They had refused. The bank of the Tombigbee, and a point within a two-day journey of Fort St. Stephen—they said naught of Mims or Sinquefield, which were better garrisoned than the decrepit palisade on Mobile Bay—must be their Mecca.

Now, forgetting everything, the weak ones railed and cursed the swampy wilderness through which they must pass. They yelled hysterical threats at Dale. He was to blame. He had got them into this God-forsaken jungle and he had better get them out to a fertile highland if he valued his fee, or his very life!

Biting the ends of his stubborn, reddish-mustache between his clamped molars, Samuel Dale led onward, ignoring the idiots who were hazarding their own safety with every breaking of the silence. He would hope for luck in this last, terrible march. When once he bade the company a brief farewell upon the laurel-crowned banks of the turgid Tombigbee, the Cajans might come if they wished. At times he sympathized deeply with these wild, fierce exiles, these jealous outcasts of the forest.

Men of great stature, fiery passions, and splendid minds they were, these Cajans of Mississippi Territory. In their arteries flowed the sturdy peasant blood of the exiled Acadian French, heightened and aristocratized by a quarter strain of the best Chah'tah, Creek and Seminole. The infusion had given to the Cajans, without taking from the Indians who had saved them from extinction in 1755 when they were thrown, nearly weaponless and foodless, upon a sinister, alien coast two thousand miles from Acadia.

Dale had risked his life among them. Once he had been saved from death only by the intervention of his lifelong friend, Red Eagle, half-Scotch chieftain of the Creek nation. He respected them as he could not respect this riff-raff of the Piedmont towns, po' white trash who sought to make themselves masters by mere transference to a new frontier. Friendship was out of the question, since his duties both to a dependent family of brothers and sisters and to the United States Army in which he held a captain's commission, precluded. His living came from the guiding and protection of wagon trains of settlers, newcomers bound for the mild climate and supposed fertility of the new Mississippi Territory.

His unattached commission placed him at the call of every wise man or fuddling bureaucrat with plans or notions in respect to the Indians, French, or Spanish. Cajans never were considered. To the unseasoned politicians come into power at Washington, mention of the Cajans who resisted trespass, killed, made reprisals for real or fancied wrongs, was passed by and ignored as might have been so many words devoted to the ferocity of the greenhead flies in April.

THIS morning Dale's blue eyes were blank, expressionless save for fugitive, darting gleams of fire which in a lesser man would have stayed to smoulder, to glow and obfuscate as sullen anger. For this one day he would keep the iron grip upon his self-control. The puerile revilings, the snarlings, the petulant weeping of women, who chose this weapon to prod their menfolk to greater daring of objection, actually passed unheard for the most part.

He watched the dim trail, the slight-marked central path trodden first by cushioned feet, then by moccasins, and now overlaid with the faint traces of two previous trains he had guided. His eyes searched out the shrubbery, the scrub, alert for a slight swaying which could have but one meaning upon this breezeless morn. Any such movement would herald Cajans, for at this time the normally sunny natured Indians were at peace; and even

quail and wild turkey, most stupid of game in this region, possessed sense enough to flee from the vocal tumult of the train.

The four span of oxen of the lead wagon floundered into a branch over which Dale had crossed by utilizing a fallen log. The beasts snorted and threshed, plowing for bottom. For an instant wild confusion reigned. Then the first pair scrambled out part way, and by sheer strength dragged their companions from a like predicament. The wagon followed.

It went into the water and soft mire like a battleship nosing from the ways. The front wheels sank, disappeared. A boy who sat beside the driver toppled forward, unnoted. The blaspheming driver was clutching for his own hold, climbing up to escape the muck which seemed about to engulf the whole wagon. Black and red in clownish streaks, the lad, choking and sputtering, managed to cling and climb back; but the wagon was stalled.

From the rear came exasperated cries, oaths which once even these rough men would not have vented before their women but which now had become as much of routine as the swinging of nine-foot ox goads.

The lead wagon was mired down. Before it or the others could proceed the laborious task of felling trees, of prying up and dragging back the wagon, would have to be accomplished. What matter that Dale had advised this in the beginning? Hadn't they struggled through a dozen such spots where he had thought the chances of success bad? Why should they build the bridges over which future caravans of his guiding might cross without effort?

Dale returned, calm-eyed, uttering no word of reproach. He took charge, disregarding the babel of sneering hatred. When the wagon and oxen both were safe and the tree-felling had begun, he recrossed the log and disappeared in the leafy thickets beyond. Within the mile this swamp vegetation gave way to the tall, silent aisles of primeval long-leaf pine, to dry aisles upon which only pitcher plants and occasional clusters of the ground palms interrupted the moulded and browned carpets of needles.

Dale dreaded that ten mile stretch of forest, and with reason. He meant to skirt it, for therein dwelt Cajans. With all his woodcraft he crept silently toward the faint wagon road debouching upon high ground.

He stopped. From the last of the huckleberry he had discerned a sign, one which caused even his corded strands of muscle a moment's nervous contraction. Ahead, thrust into the red clay of the path, projected a pair of sticks. Clothyard length they were—the unit of measurement learned by the French, to their sorrow, at Cressy and Poitiers, and brought with them to the new world.

These were not arrows, however, but more sinister objects still to him who knew the Chah'tah lore adapted by their white-skinned brothers from Acadia! These were paired wands, scarlet with the pigment of the October swamp maple. Each stick was crossed by a fellow half its length, and lashed as a blood-red cross by withes cut from the bark of ironwood. All scarlet, grim in warning.

Samuel Dale emerged from cover. He walked slowly to the edge of the rising ground. His musket lowered, and he crossed his elbows for a moment upon the tall barrel. This was the end, not only for the course of this particular wagon train but also for any other caravans he might guide to this vicinity. Without troops willing to engage in a bloody battle at the worst possible disadvantage, no one could pass this spot. Doubtless at the very moment silent forms lurked beyond, willing to abide by a grim truce as long as their possessions were not invaded, yet ready for the sternest gamble did one of the incoming colonists disregard the explicit warning.

With a frown for the thought of retracing the two miles of heavy swamp with these men and women, Dale lifted his musket and swung back. It was significant that he did not glance to the rear. The Cajans had presented their notification. They knew that he had seen it and read the meaning aright. He was in no danger as long as his footsteps led away from the swamp edge.

He reached the wagons just as the work of filling the draw with trunks and leafy boughs had reached an end. Oxen of the first wagon were being spanned. The vocal tumult had lapsed in sullen weariness.

With his first words of regret came an instant heightening of the tension. The gaunt-faced, stoop-shouldered men stared incredulously. Grunts of dismay came, mingled with whisperings, half-completed demands, a shrill, sneering laugh of despair and hysteria from one of the women.

And then a hell of understanding. Did Dale mean to stand there and tell them,

after all these days of striving, of hardship, that they would be forced to turn back? He did. He was 'courteous but firm; for in spite of all their ingratitude and ignorance he pitied them. It was a disappointment which might have caused stronger men to break into vileness.

These weaklings were stunned. Many of them sank to the ooze, completely overcome, their lips and tongues spitting forth weak curses but their initiative crushed. They scarcely heard his substitute offer to take them to any other part of the South at no additional charge, or even to return them to the Piedmont plain if they so desired. He felt a certain responsibility, for even with the two wagon trains which had won through previously there had been sinister signs. Perhaps he had been wrong in falling in with their expressed desires. At any rate he would stick by them until they had found a country which suited. Perhaps a little farther to the south, near the Chickasabogue——

Just too late he caught the flash of movement behind. He dodged, snatching at the handle of his sheath knife with the instinctive motion of a woods fighter. At that instant, however, came the *thunk* of a heavy blow. With a single suspiration curiously like the sigh of a child in sleep, he tottered, then slumped forward in the muck. Jed Praeter, the lanky Carolina cracker whom Dale had disciplined on that earlier occasion, shouted and leered in hideous triumph as he swung the butt of a loaded whip, poising for a second, finishing stroke.

Someone intervened. There was a second of shocked mutterings; then the men gathered for a consultation. They glanced stonily at the fallen Dale. While they definitely ruled against further violence toward his body, adjudged lifeless, they spoke not a word concerning punishment to be meted out to his supposed slayer.

Mean creatures. Uppermost in the minds of each was the thought that now they would not have to pay the fifteen dollars per head exacted by Dale as his fee for the long journey. If it were a matter of retracing their steps, they had learned enough woodcraft to be able to follow back the deep-gored tracks.

Now they were free for an unhampered choice, however. No one spoke of a retreat. There was some mulling over the reasons for Dale's command. One or two wished that Jed had not been so hasty; had vouchsafed Dale time enough to tell them more fully of the perils which lay ahead. Cajans? None of them knew more than vaguely that any such creatures existed. Opinion came to a consensus that Cajans were some degenerate tribe of Indians. Probably they would not furnish real opposition. If matters came to a decision, however, sixteen well armed white men ought to hold their own.

Early that afternoon Jed Praeter led the way across the log bridge, with the oxen and wagons crossing on the temporary corduroy. When Jed reached the crossed sticks of scarlet he gazed at them a moment contemptuously, then kicked them aside. The wagons passed on into the silent aisles of pitch-glistening pine. If several quail, which ordinarily whistle their *poo-wheets* only after sunset, awakened to comment sibilantly upon the passing of the train, none of the settlers paid attention.

THE creaking of ungreased wheels and rubbing yokes had faded into the first hush of the forest before Dale stirred. The fox squirrels, chattering gossipy *cha-cha-gweeks* to one another concerning that moaning, prone figure, had scampered down in curiosity, then hastily aloft again, before one of Dale's hands slid slowly forward from its wrist depth in the ooze, and touched the back of his head where a swelling, throbbing lump had risen.

He awakened dizzily. For some moments after dragging himself to a crouch he stared about, half blind, his brain seesawing in sickening waves. Then instinct asserted itself. Crawling, pausing long moments, he managed to drag himself to the thin trickle of clear water in the center of the branch. There he lay prone, submerging his head until the coolness permeated his burning head.

He waited. Then he drank. With the help of a whitened root of magnolia which crinkled down into the slough like some great albino python, he staggered erect. Then he walked slowly back, searching for his musket.

It was gone, as were his powder-horn, bullets, and wallet of money. Even a sheaf of unmailed letters he had written evenings before the campfires, letters he had intended to send to his brothers and sisters back in Georgia, if chance arose, had been thought of value to the looter of his person. Only his sheath knife, drawn and

scabbardless, had escaped. He wiped it dry and thrust it through his belt. A meager weapon enough, yet his only possession, outside of the drenched and muddied clothes upon his back!

Ten minutes more dispelled the dizziness and nausea, though black vertical bars remained to float before his eyes. Shoulders squared, and the opaque blue eyes crinkled into a squint that was as the focussing of a burning glass lens. He saw the deep, flooded tracks across the branch. He crossed the fallen log and followed. Treachery to Sam Dale had been found unprofitable by white men on earlier occasions; if these plunderers were to escape his wrath the circumstance was to bring no joy to them.

Borne along the verdure-tunneled branches as a muffled uproar punctuated by flat sounds like slaps of a switch in loose sand, the din of the massacre reached him presently. He stopped. Even at the distance he could distinguish the shrill overtones of mortal terror, the inconsequent poppings of muskets useless at close quarters when once their charges were fired.

In all not more than ten or twelve shots. The Cajans, then, had used arrows, much more deadly weapons than powder and lead, because capable of being loosed with deadly aim one to a second.

Dale halted. In spite of his ire a chill crept into his blood. He could be of no assistance, even if he saw a reason for fighting upon the side of these despicable ones who had flouted his trust and protection.

Then he swept forward at a speedier pace. He had remembered two of the children, a wan-faced, wistful little miss with ragged curls who had reminded him pitifully though vaguely of his own youngest sister as she had been in childhood, and a rugged, freckled-faced urchin who at twelve was more of a man than his sire.

The way proved longer than he had expected, even making allowance for the speaking-tube qualities of the branch tunnels. He must have lain unconscious a full hour or more. Many minutes before he arrived at the forest glade in which the attack occurred, the last undercurrents of sound had faded into whispers and died.

There was no use rushing madly upon victorious Cajans. Dale slowed, stepping as noiselessly as a bobcat, dropping to hands and knees when small shelter was afforded. If he was to be of the slightest assistance to possible survivors he must avoid the swift flight of the arrow which would greet instantly his discovery by these tight-mouthed, merciless defenders of the wilderness.

A glance or two through openings between the trees showed him that even the oxen and wagons had departed. This was curious. He circled, holding a deep radius and watching every tree trunk for sight of the foe.

It became plain now, however, that neither Cajan nor settler remained on the scene of combat—excepting only a few huddled shapes there upon the ground. There was no need of inspecting these. The Cajans, whose intention was to exterminate, would have left no wounded enemies.

A low, raucous groan caused him to tense. The sound emanated from a thick clump of shrubbery behind and to one side. He peered long and suspiciously at the tangle. In itself this thicket was unusual enough here in the woods on moderately high ground. Could this be a baited trap, set for possible survivors of the battle? Or had one of the settlers fallen, managing to crawl away to concealment? Utilizing a maximum of his woodcraft, Dale approached, stopping at times to listen to the sounds which came now at more frequent, agonized intervals.

He viewed a shocking sight. Beyond the underbrush lay a pot-hole or honeycomb, one of those not unusual sinks in a land where bedrock often is a quarter mile below the clay surface. This recurrence of the swamp explained the luxuriant bushes. It did not offer a reason for the plight of the unfortunate individual it held in its grasp.

A man lay there, buried to his shoulders in the slime, kept from sinking to immediate oblivion only by a few thorny trailers of Chah'tah rose he had contrived to snatch from their interminable climbing on shrub and tree.*

He was alive, just alive. Whether settler or Cajan, Dale could not determine from a hasty glance. For that matter he did not care. Death as a punishment for a crime or indiscretion, death in a stand-up fight, all were well enough. Slow suffocation in treacherous ooze was another thing. Slashing down more of the climbing rose, he twisted the strands into a crude rope

*Note: These strands are often 200 feet and more in length. They climb one side of a tree, cross down the other side, and ramble across intervening shrubbery until they find another tree worthy of their best efforts.—A. M. B.

capable of sustaining a quarter ton, tied one end to the stanch trunk of a pitch pine and the other end to his own belt, and waded in.

AS HE neared the other man Dale discerned what probably accounted in terrible fashion for the Cajan's plight, for Cajan he proved to be. Clasped rigidly in the hand which also was looped over the sustaining withes, was the head of a snake! Its jaws gaped in death, though its coils still encircled the man's arm. Beneath the pressure of that mighty grip the empty skin had come together where the head had been completely severed from the body.

Cautious yet swift, Dale looped the saving thorns about the half-unconscious Cajan. There came an instant of doubt, a moment when it seemed that neither the original victim nor Dale himself would win free from the clinging muck. Then a sucking, reluctant sound. Dale reached a footing upon pine needles. The rest was easy. Slime covered, the two stretched out in near exhaustion.

His own hands and arms streaming blood, Dale roused in a few moments. He had closed his fingers upon the hot, angry right forearm of the Cajan. He knew that a deadly menace still threatened the man he had saved. That arm was not iron hard with muscle as the left. It felt spongy. With the quickness of distaste Dale tore away the dead serpent from the viselike grasp, then inspected the arm. Four punctures. The arm was already swollen from the venom of the spotted moccasin. Drowsiness—almost the coma which precedes the end. There was little chance.

Dale might have wondered at himself had he stopped to analyze that battle with a horrid death which almost had claimed its victim, likely a worthy victim, too! He did not wait. One of his own rawhide laces, supplemented by a pad sliced from his own leather shirt, made a rude tourniquet which had to be adjusted as close to the shoulder as possible and drawn cruelly tight.

Water, brought from a surface well hastily dug with his sheath knife, washed the arm after a fashion. Straight slashes laid open the swollen arm, draining blood and venom from around the wound.

The Cajan stared dully, his eyes glassy and uncomprehending, probably no longer feeling pain. Dale left him as soon as it was possible and searched the thicket for Yaupon holly. Odd that it must cluster about the sinks where dwell the destroyers whose venom in some measure it neutralizes.

Breaking, rubbing the leaves and orange berries into a rough paste, Dale bound them about the bleeding wounds. When they were covered, he scooped up plain muck, and poulticed with that. Surgery of the rudest, this, but the Cajan did not die. At sunup of the next morning he was muttering in a fever, but the arm swelling had gone down. Dale removed the tourniquet and massaged the uninjured portions of the arm to ward off the danger of gangrene.

Later Dale, finding a flint and steel in the Cajan's pouch, slivered a broken, dead bough of fat pine, struck, and had a fire. Utilizing the emptied powder-horn of the rescued man, Dale managed to brew in a mild heat an occult concoction over which he grinned to himself, albeit grimly. It was the black drink of the Chah'tahs and Cajans themselves, a beverage which, except for cases of snake poisoning, was of more than doubtful value. Intensely bitter, to some stomachs a forceful emetic, it was the Indian's test of life and death.

Throughout all of the Creek Confederacy a sick man who defied the arts of the medicine man, was forced to swallow a quantity of black drink. If he kept it down he would recover. If he retched, he surely would die anyway, so the *minko* administering calmly strangled him. His bones were cleaned, and his skeleton hung up to dry in the Sweating House.

Noting the gaunt cheeks and red-rimmed eyes of his patient, Dale suspected that the Cajan had suffered from malaria previous to his mishap. He was a huge, steel-muscled man, however; his arms, legs and torso, even in repose, yielded but slightly to the testing pressure of thumb and finger. Well above six feet, his skin a sultry, golden tan, his hair and the irises of his eyes black as the wing of a turkey buzzard, he was a splendid example even of the early nineteenth century Cajan, a race of giants.

Possibly the black draught, combining with the serpent venom proved too much for the mosquito-borne parasites in his blood. Perhaps the malaria germs thought the excretions of snake fangs a particularly exhilarating brand of shinny. At

any rate, though Dale scarcely expected the other man to live through a second day, the Cajan's fever abated. Though limp as a sodden leaf, unable to stand when Dale half-carried him to a temporary lean-to shelter constructed against a sub-tropic storm threatening from the Gulf, the Cajan looked upon his rescuer with eyes that had cleared—only to cloud again in silent wonderment and stoicism.

Undoubtedly the patient believed Dale had saved him only to taste later the delights of some outlandish torture; though the Southern Indians themselves never mutilated or tortured prisoners, fearsome tales were brought in by runners from the North, telling of the hellish practices of the whites and of the redskin tribes who sought to hold their lands against the invader.

DALE left his patient during most of the second day, returning only to present a few berries he had gathered and bring drinking water. The Cajan scarcely had moved. His jet eyes fixed upon Dale, moving as the latter moved. No words were spoken.

Dale faced a problem greater than the saving of this man's life. He had found and identified the bodies of eleven of the sixteen men who had come in the wagons. Doubtless the others were scattered about in the scrub. He would search them out later. Meanwhile, where were the women and children, the oxen and wagons? According to the sign, all these had gone out southward toward the heart of the Cajan holdings. Following the trail, Samuel Dale soon came to a few scattered shanties. He could not pass without a wide detour, and did not wish to pass without making certain his erstwhile companions were not held prisoner in this formless settlement.

He lay in cover, listening to the occasional sounds of human life. Once a party of four men passed within yards of his hiding-place. They spoke in the queer *patois* of French and Indian which was the parent of the still stranger Cajan tongue of today. He could gather the gist of a sentence or two, yet gained no pertinent information.

At last he gave up. Circling stealthily, he raided a small truck patch, gleaning a few raw vegetables which would have to suffice as rations. Then he returned, his face set as an image chipped from flint. Straight to the Cajan he stalked.

"Your name?" he demanded, speaking in French with only the admixture of occasional Indian words.

The Cajan understood.

"Aristide Benier, m'sieu," he replied in a rumbling voice of hoarse resonance.

Dale nodded.

"I am Samuel Dale. I shall take you back with me as a prisoner to answer for this murdering of my people."

There was no heightening of his tone in uttering the statement. Nevertheless the Cajan's eyes widened in horror. His skin paled to the hue of mould upon an orange. Death in one form or another he had expected. To be dragged away to face the unnamable awfulness which would be inflicted by the fiendish Americans, struck a shaft of real terror into his heart. The perspiration of weakness and fear came in microscopic beads to his forehead. Only with a visible effort could he restrain the cry of protest which rose to his lips.

"Your punishment will be considered small compensation, I fear," continued Dale after a brief pause. "However, I must know one thing. Did you murder the women and children also?"

Perhaps the Cajan was not to be judged by his own standards of manhood in that moment. He was staring, horrified and chilled, at a vision of himself dragged before the terrible Americans, blood cousins of the red-coated devils who had dealt out heartless tragedy to his people little more than half a century before.

A stifled cry fled his lips, a cry of denial. He had not participated in the massacre. He——

Abruptly he stopped, as Dale bent his own grave face, watching intently. He had not expected anything of this sort. To find the man actually pleading for mercy was astonishing. The Cajan suddenly stiffened, biting his lip. It was as if he just had realized how far his own panic had carried him. Pride returned with a rush, and with it the blood rose beneath the tan of hollow cheeks. He changed the subject suddenly, and spoke with bitter force.

"We are of Acady, m'sieu! We do not war upon the helpless. All those of the invaders not of fighting sex or age even now are nearing the fort taken by the Spanish from the French four years since. Thence they may be certain of assistance back to their own land. With them are all

their possessions, even to the clothing, trinkets, and weapons of their men. We of Acady ask only that none molest us. We warn; then we strike!"

It had been a strange, complete transformation. Dale shifted, not removing his glance from the flashing eyes below, yet wondering. The man spoke the truth, even if at first he had seemed to be lying. Probably all had been truth. His accident could have happened prior to the massacre. If so, there could be little justice in taking him on the toilsome back trail to a certain death he did not merit.

For the moment Dale delayed the decision. He had searched among the fallen Americans for sight of one certain body. Now that he knew the women and children safe, he felt a recrudescence of the stern desire for surety. Jed Praeter was the only one of the riffraff with the shadow of a reason to strike down Samuel Dale. He would assume the leadership. Had he paid the penalty brought upon his comrades by his own treachery?

Jed was not one of the fallen eleven. Dale, believing that somewhere in the woods or scrub must lie the body of that renegade, nevertheless intended to make certain. His quarrel was with Praeter far more than with any of the Cajans. Turning silently upon his heel, he strode away among the pines, beginning the slow, toilsome search for the completed report which he would make, and for the certainty which alone could sate the implacable anger in his heart.

In several hours of cautious reconnoiter he discovered three more bodies transfixed with Cajan arrows. Praeter and one other, a nervous, rather silly old man named Bogardus, were missing from the roll. Another day Dale would resume the search. He returned to the camp, hungry.

The Cajan was gone! Within the lean-to of boughs Dale saw, to his immense astonishment, a rather ancient flintlock with powder-horn and metal case of bullets reposing upon a blanket of Yazoo weave. A small basket of withes, covered against the insects, also came to light when he lifted the blanket. Within were ten hoecakes and four cooked and stuffed mourning doves.

The expression of those opaque blue eyes did not seem to alter, yet Dale hunkered down before the array and stared a full minute before hunger pangs broke through his astonishment and he fell upon the repast.

DEEP in the brush of a sloping peninsula which dipped into the swamp to the east, two separated, panting figures lay. One, wheezy of breath and still bearing the broken stub of an arrow in his shoulder, was an oldster whose weak eyes dripped continuous tears though not of weeping. His restless fingers plucked ceaselessly at the leaves upon which he lay, at his own tattered clothing. This was Hank Bogardus, silly patriarch of the ill-fated train.

Unaware of the nearness of the oldster, the second man cowered motionless, only his terror-stricken eyes roving in uninterrupted search. Jed Praeter, taking to his heels at the first alarm, still lived to cluch the bayoneted musket for which he had no powder. He shivered with the vain horror of one who thought of his own safety alone, wasting not a regret upon the others whose lives had been sacrificed to his treachery.

The Cajans had missed sight of him. Would they trail? His slack jaw quivered, and a low whimper of self-pity came from his shaking, bloodless lips. The deadly ferocity of that surprise attack had sapped even the imitation courage from his veins.

A stir came in the impenetrable anise. The maroon stars shook. He started half-erect, gooseflesh rising upon his skin from the sheer chill of mortal terror. One of the Cajans! He did not dare wait to face the newcomer whose first act would be to loose one of those deadly, feathered shafts. The anise bush stood within three yards of him. Palpably the Cajan was sliding through, unaware of Jed's immediate presence. Of a sudden the cracker crouched. One hand clutched the heavy musket butt. With all his strength he hurled the bayonet point straight into the moving bush, then turned and ran blindly.

There behind him old Hank Bogardus, transfixed with the triangular bayonet, sank down to gasp out his life in lonely tragedy.

Jed recovered some of his presence of mind with the first step into that quaking, bottomless mire. He went to one hip, saving himself by clutching a projecting root. For several moments he clung, expecting momentarily to see the companions of that Cajan dash into view. None came. Jed finally crawled out, shaken yet still alive.

An hour later, frantically desiring to put greater distance between himself and the enemy, he began a slow, painstaking exploration. He did not wish to return the way he had come. Was there not another path across this quagmire? Dale had known of one way over which a wagon train had been able to pass——

A long time later the fugitive, dulled into hopelessness from his sheer fatigue, abandoned the search. As far as he was able to see not a single pathway save the bottle neck of the peninsula—at which the massacre had occurred—offered escape. Jed Praeter would not go near that blood-drenched glade again until driven by hunger. Though he failed to guess the fact, not the Cajans, who believed every male of the train to have fallen, but a still more merciless enemy would be following the sign left by his headlong flight before he deserted the temporary safety of that covert.

Two nights and a day dragged past. Jed was chewing leaves and bark hacked from the shrubs. He munched mouthfuls of green dewberries, which offered little satisfaction. Even with the certainty of ultimate starvation facing him where he crouched, a long time passed before he could make up his mind. Only one chance offered. He must have a musket with powder and lead. Perchance such a weapon might have been lost and overlooked at the scene of conflict. If so he had to find it, or else face the toilsome back trail through a land of which he knew little, equipped only with a skinning knife.

His own musket still might lie where he had hurled it, though the chances were slim as he saw them. Snaking a way through the underbrush he finally retraced a way to the anise bush. There he found the gun, and a billowing mound of buzzards engaged upon their ghoulish work.

Jed grinned a sickly imitation of scorn. He chased away the slow-winged scavengers, then callously appropriated his weapon and the few effects of the man he had slain. The powder in the horn of old Bogardus was damp from a sprinkle of rain, yet it could be dried. Hearing no sound of the Cajans, Jed heartened considerably. He began to wish that there could be some method by which he could revenge himself secretly and awfully upon that half-wild tribe of murderers. Poison a spring, perhaps. Some coup, of course, which would allow him to get well on a homeward way before its effects struck the Cajans.

NANETTE BENIER, a long-legged, overwhelmingly curious woods sprite of ten, gave him his inspiration. In the excitement of her elders which followed the battle and capture of prisoners, she slipped away. Furtively, yet with her black eyes flashing inordinate thrill and pleasure, she had scouted the scene of carnage, shaking small fists at the silent bodies of the invaders.

So occupied was her attention that she stumbled straight into the fierce, jubilant grasp of Jed Praeter before she guessed his presence. A heavy hand clapped over her lips checked the scream of fright. The only sound was a slight rustle, then the grunt of satisfaction from Jed. Here was his vengeance, one which would furnish full scope for the satiation of his bestial instincts—and which promised no added danger to himself.

Quickly he bound and gagged the child with strips torn from her own dress. Dragging her to a sitting position against the bole of a live oak, he snatched down lengths of gray moss and tied them across her thin throat and waist. Then, his eyes flaming with the gloating cruelty of anticipation, he drew the keen skinning knife, and whetted it upon the calf of one high moccasin.

"D'you know what I'm goin' t' do t' you?" he mouthed at the terrified girl.

The knife, tested by the ball of one knotted thumb, cut circles in the air before the captive's face. Even though he wanted to be out of this region as quickly as possible, Jed could not restrain the added pleasure of indulgence given by protracting the awful deed. He feinted several times, bringing the knife point so close in upward slashes that it ripped through the child's flimsy garment.

A shudder swept her. She became limp, the black eyes closing in merciful unconsciousness.

Jed growled disgustedly.

"I'm goin' t'——" he began again, then saw that threats were useless.

The knife came up.

At that second strong fingers clenched themselves in the unkempt hair of his head. Jed felt himself jerked upward from his hunkering position, thrown backward into the thorns with a force which nearly tore the scalp from his cranium!

He yelled in a paroxysm of terror, certain that the avenging Cajans had come.

Yet, when his frightened gaze encompassed the stern, crouching man who waited silently for Jed to arise, the last semblance of manhood fled the cracker. This was Samuel Dale, the man left for dead back there at the swamp!

True, Dale voiced no verbal reproaches, yet his slitted eyes, his crouch with bared knife ready, spoke volumes. The moment Jed arose the woodsman would be upon him, slashing, killing. There could be no escape.

With a squeal like that of a cornered rat, Jed attempted to scramble away on all fours. In three strides Dale caught him.

"Get up and fight for your life!" came the low, tense command. "Get up like a man or I shall cut your throat!"

That much leeway was offered, yet Jed chose not to accept it. Perhaps he feared his knees would not have supported him even for an instant. Instead of rising, he gathered himself upon his haunches, then sprang, head down, and right arm with the knife describing a wide upward circle as it aimed at Dale's chest.

One of Dale's knees bent slightly to receive the impact. His left hand caught and held the cracker's wrist and weapon at the vertical. One swift downward stab at the base of the skull and Dale's vengeance was complete. He stepped back, wiping his knife.

Without glancing again at the dead cracker, Dale released the unconscious child, made certain that, save for fright, she was unharmed, then lifted her, still unconscious in his arms. He had no thought save to take her from that spot, revive her, then counsel an immediate return to her home. Leaving his musket where it lay, he made off through the woods toward the lean-to where Aristide Benier also had received Dale's ministrations.

Unfortunately for Dale, this course lay directly away from the Cajan settlement. He had no warning. Like shadows, four of the swarthy skinned warriors fell upon him, snatching away his burden and pinioning him beneath the muscle and weight of three men each of whom might have conquered him in a matching of brute strength. Five minutes later, bound and helpless, he was driven toward the Cajan settlement.

From the first it was apparent that, in addition to the fact of his race, the woodsmen held against Dale a more bitter indictment. Their terse threats, growled from the throat, made it known that he was believed to have stolen the girl child —for what fiendish purpose it was easy to guess. His shocked attempts at protest and explanation—he would die, if need be, as an enemy, yet his soul revolted at the horror of having even his deadly antagonists believe him degenerate—were pounded from his lips by blows of the open palm. The frowning men wished no word from him; he would have been dead minutes since save for their caution in rescuing the girl.

ARISTIDE BENIER, returning vastly worried from the first search he and two men friends had made for the missing daughter, found one of the huts besieged by a crowd of fellow Cajans. The story quickly was told him. Nanette had not wandered away; she had been stolen by one of the dogs of Americans who was caught bearing her away as he sought to escape.

No, she had not been harmed; she was at the home of her father. Would he not go immediately, then return to hear the decision of the council? Even at that moment the fate of the thief and despoiler was being decided in chambers; and Aristide's services doubtless would be needed. This time he could not grudge his duty.

The last grim reference was made to the distaste he professed toward the office of executioner which three years earlier he had accepted unthinkingly. The Cajans, though no longer utilizing the guillotine, retained decapitation as the means of capital punishment. Aristide Benier, twice in his term of office, had been called upon to wield the heavy cleaver upon the necks of condemned men. This third time he would have no hesitation, though, if the savage growl which rumbled from his chest were any indication. If but one hair of Nanette's head were harmed the despoiler would find no quick mercy in the stroke of Aristide, which never before had needed repetition!

The judging was finished even as Aristide entered his own dwelling to embrace his rejoicing wife and the rescued child. Blindfolded, bound, and gagged against his incessant attempts to clear the name of Dale of any such stain as had been put upon it, the prisoner was led forth, surrounded by fierce, implacable men and shouting women nearly as bloodthirsty as Indian squaws. He was forced to kneel at the low stump before the chapel. Aristide was called, the cleaver thrust into his

willing hand, and he was led forth to the stroke of vengeance upon the invader who had sought to wrong the child he loved.

A slow, stern voice was intoning the judgment as Benier approached, rolling up his right sleeve. The group fell silent. "To thou, Aristide Benier," came the command, "falls the task of severing the head from the body, of speeding toward its aeons in purgatory, this soul of a man too wicked for life upon earth!"

A terse, clipped sound came from between the Cajan's teeth as he pushed through to obey the behest. He reached the stump, brandishing the eight-pound cleaver. Before the bowed figure he stopped, reached forward to lift Dale's head for a stern searching of the features of the man who would dare plan harm to one of the loved ones of Aristide Benier.

The second he encountered the gaze of those blue eyes, opaque no more but tortured with a fire of protest at the affixing of a shame and a stigma unmerited, Aristide uttered a choked exclamation and sprang back.

"There—this cannot be the man!" he cried. "It is a mistake. I shall not kill this one. He——"

Instantly the hush of expectancy was broken. A dozen voices broke into a protesting clamor. Of what could Benier be thinking? Would he not take joy in avenging the attempted wrong, particularly when the condemned man was of the number of the hated invaders? None of that assemblage had heard the story of Aristide's adventure; he had kept silent with the shrinking of a man of honor who realizes to the full that once and once only in his life has his tongue betrayed him for the sake of saving his life.

He tried to remonstrate now, but in vain. Dale was to die. Benier must give the stroke. Dog! Cur! That one was below even the dignity of an execution. Let the elders remove the ban, and even the women would participate gladly in rending him to bits!

At last Pere Mascaigne, president of the council, stepped forward, his upraised arm commanding silence. When a hush had fallen, he faced again to Benier.

"It is not for you to protest against the righteous judgment, Aristide Benier," he said in a cold, stern voice. "Obey, and keep your peace!"

For a moment the tall Cajan stood speechless, his proud features working. Then he turned abruptly to Dale.

"You have not wished to harm my little one—you, a man?" he demanded rapidly. In the same instant he seized the gag and bandage and yanked them below the captive's chin.

Dale's mouth was freed. His head raised to meet the tortured glare of the Cajan's eyes.

"Before the living God, Aristide Benier, strike as you will, but never believe that Samuel Dale thought of dealing harm to any of the helpless! I saved your girl from another of my race, a renegade, as perchance she herself might testify."

"It is all one! Kill the dog! Kill him!" came the voice of the small mob.

"Strike!" boomed the voice of Mascaigne.

With one furious gesture of the cleaver which threatened to decapitate a number of those crowding about, the Cajan gained a second of silence.

"I will speak!" he cried in his powerful, overwhelming voice. "I, Aristide Benier, know this man has committed no wrong! If he has been guilty of trespass, he has won back his life——"

But there even his powerful voice was drowned. Only the commanding gesture of Mascaigne was clear above the clamor. Dale must die.

Beside himself with gratitude, remembrances of his shame, and sure knowledge that he was being called upon to murder a man worthy rather of reward, Aristide pushed back Samuel Dale and leaped to the stump.

"Hearken! Listen, fools of noise!" he screamed, still waving the cleaver to keep back those who would have rushed to finish the captive with their own hands. "Watch your compatriot, Aristide Benier, die for the man who saved his life. With this cleaver——" and here he shifted the heavy weapon to his left hand, and swung it aloft, at the same time thrusting forth his clenched right fist to the horizontal—"with this blade Aristide Benier shall strike off the arm which would have to kill his friend, the man to whom he owes his life!"

In spite of the killing lust, his threat struck home. His black eyes gleaming, his long hair touseled and erect as a mane, the Cajan made an arresting picture. None doubted this word pledged before them all. The pride of a woods people, simple as regarded their code of honor, would carry him through. Doubtless he would stand, waving them away from the body of Dale until the last of life had spurted from his severed arteries!

A doubt halted the resumption of their

cries. Why did this Cajan shield a blood enemy? There must be a stronger reason than the mere distaste for capital punishment evinced before by Benier, a reason which might have been brought out earlier had Samuel Dale been allowed to testify in his own behalf.

The Cajans muttered, glanced doubtfully from one to another. Pere Mascaigne it was who broke the stalemate.

"Tell what reason moves you to defend this dog of an American," he bade.

Aristide's arm swept down, though only to begin a series of explanatory, half-triumphant gestures. He knew that he had won. From his lips, unrenderably fast, fell the tale of his mishap and the manner in which Dale had saved him from a death by snake venom.

AT THE end, Benier called upon Dale to explain how it had happened that he was bearing Nanette in his arms. This Dale gave them in simple, dignified language. A runner was dispatched to verify the fact of Jed Praeter's death at the designated spot. Then Nanette herself, now recovered from her mishap, was called to testify. She glanced once, frowning in puzzled fashion, at Dale, then shook her black curls decidedly. This was not the man, not the horrible man who had wanted to cut her to pieces with a knife. She had never seen this one before!

Cajan justice, though crude, contained its element of mercy. Dale was released. The others of the settlement all stopped before him, speaking a few grave words of apology. Then they left him to Benier, who brought to him supplies and the weapons found by the messengers to the swamp.

In American fashion, Dale thrust out his hand, asking for a clasp of comradeship which would have phrased his gratitude far better than words. Aristide regarded it gravely, but did not offer to reciprocate.

"When once you cross the black swamp," said the Cajan, "red sticks stand again between you and me. We are strangers."

And Samuel Dale, on the long, roundabout trail to Fort Marécage where the women and children had been sent, pondered most deeply upon the flush almost of *shame* which he had seen mantling the cheeks of Aristide in the moment of parting!

THE SLICKS

IN THE intermingling among the border populations of the half-civilized savages with white men that were too often land hungry and impatient of the alleged rights of the natives, the enforcement of law and the protection of life and property in many cases would have broken down completely but for the temporary assistance of organizations that were in themselves essentially unlawful and un-American.

Possibly no organization better illustrates this dual character than the Slicks, which flourished along the southern border of the Cherokee Nation about 1830. Its original purpose was the suppression of the Pony Club, a band of rustlers and outlaws that had ravaged four states with impunity for several years. In suppressing horse thieves the Slicks had the good will of all law-abiding citizens, but the society had undertaken a tremendous task and it seemed necessary that its organization should be secret.

This attracted to its ranks many adventurers and others of questionable integrity, and the organizers were soon confronted with the difficult problem of governing and controlling their own membership. Indeed, it threatened to rival the Pony Club itself in acts of violence. It was at this stage of its existence that it acquired the suggestive name of the Slicks, bestowed upon it as an uncomplimentary epithet.

But the Slicks finally justified their existence, for they raided the Buckhorn Tavern, bagged the ring-leaders of the Pony Club, placed them in jail at Carrollton, Ga. and guarded them against delivery until the court convened.

At the same term of court, in 1832, that tried and convicted the leaders of the Pony Club, the Grand Jury, in its general presentments that were spread upon the minutes of the court, took occasion to defend the Slicks against some of the criticisms that had been leveled against them, and praised them for their share in destroying the scourge of horse thieves.

This court wrote the last chapter in both these famous organizations, for with the original purpose of their organization accomplished, the Slicks quickly disappeared.—J. A.

THE VALLEY OF DESOLATION

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON
Author of "The Fence Builders"

John Black led those eighteen pioneering wagons into the Valley of Promise; when seventeen departed he alone refused to admit it the Valley of Desolation. That was before the Rivers' cattle arrived and the valley became a place even more sinister

FOUR years before, eighteen covered wagons with brave new canvas, fresh though dusty paint on the running gears, drawn by hard muscled young horses, had entered hopefully into the little valley between the mountains. Today, seventeen of those wagons with canvas covers torn and frayed, paint completely gone, and with horses grown old and weak from hard work and poor feed, were pulling out.

One wagon remained behind.

From the little rocky grotto, high up on the mountainside, which she had long since appropriated for her own, Sadie Black watched the hopeless little caravan crawling down the dusty road of defeat. Her mood was resentful, but despite herself her chin began to quiver. A few scalding tears of pity for those gloomy ones in the wagons, and for herself, rolled down her cheeks as she mentally reviewed the panorama of disappointments, of one crop failure after another, that had crushed the spirit of the little band of pioneers, with the solitary exception of her own father who alone had elected to remain behind with his family.

At that moment she half hated her father for his stubbornness; and yet she knew that she herself had been equally stubborn. There had been a way open for her to leave with the others if she had cared to accept it.

The wagons took a slight up-grade around a bend, and for a moment Sadie was vouchsafed a look at the driver of the lead wagon, still close enough that she could distinguish the outlines of his granite-like profile. By turning his head he might have seen her, and she knew that he must have guessed that she was there, but he relentlessly faced the front. Slowly her face changed into hard lines; yet she was fair enough to acknowledge that Matt was not at all to blame.

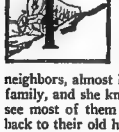
The night before he had pleaded with her for hours to go out with him. They had been tacitly engaged ever since they had come to Desolation Valley, but somehow Sadie had always shrank from a marriage with a slow, phlegmatic farmer. One season after another of failure, with its attendant hardships and poverty, had kindled the fires of revolt within her. As long as she remained single there was the chance that she might yet escape it all, but as the wife of Matt Bellamy it would all have to be lived over again, Matt was

the restless, pioneer type that could thrive only on virgin soil.

And then there was the stranger.

A slow, half pensive smile flitted over her face a moment at recollection of the half clandestine meetings with the handsome man who called himself Joe Rivers, cattle buyer by profession, and adventurer by nature. Her acquaintance with him had come about quite naturally. In the little colony had been a school-teacher, a Mrs. Betts, and in the lonely first years she had been Sadie's most intimate friend, they two, among all the colony, being book readers. One day Rivers had stopped at the Betts place for a drink of water while Sadie was visiting there. There were books lying about, and the stranger had displayed a marked familiarity with good literature. Good Mrs. Betts had been almost pathetic in her desire to have him come again, and after one glance at Sadie the stranger apparently was not greatly averse.

He came again and again, but for some reason he did not care to meet the men of the colony, so Mrs. Betts usually contrived to have Sadie come over when the stranger arrived. It was finally impressed upon the school-mistress that Rivers did not come entirely to discuss books, but the idea that she was helping to develop a romance completely mollified her.



THE wagon train passed around the bend and dropped out of sight in a gulch, and suddenly Sadie felt a choking sensation in her burning throat. For years those people had been her neighbors, almost like members of her own family, and she knew that she would never see most of them again. Some would go back to their old homes in the East, utterly discouraged; others would go on trying to find some more favorable place to pioneer in the then but little known West. Her heart cried out to them in the silent, bitter agony of parting.

She turned her head and her tear-dimmed gaze rested upon a solitary figure behind a plow, plodding grimly on, turning over again the acres of black, loamy soil that four times in succesion had refused to produce a crop. There was something heroic about the resolute figure of John Black, but his daughter could see only a childish perverseness.

Suddenly she gave a startled gasp as two strong hands descended lightly upon her shoulders. Half turning her body, she gazed into the handsome, smiling face of Joe Rivers. His lips were parted, displaying teeth as strong and white as a wolf's beneath a silky, short, brown mustache. "Gentleman Joe" Rivers was a handsome man, and he knew it.

"Mrs. Betts told me I'd probably find you here, and she wanted me to cheer you up a bit when the people left," he said softly.

"It's—it's hard to see them go," she said brokenly.

"But there was nothing for them to stay for," he argued. "This will never be a farming country. It'll never be any good for anything but range cattle."

"Then you think we're foolish to stay here?" she asked.

"Not necessarily," he smiled. "In fact it may be the best thing that ever happened to you folks. It all depends upon your father. But let's sit down."

His hands were still upon her shoulders, and their caressing touch filled her with a new shyness. She was glad enough to escape them by dropping to a seat on the edge of the grotto with her feet dangling over the edge. But she was not to escape him so easily, and the sight of her bare feet and ankles below the faded calico dress added to her embarrassment. It was the first time she had met Rivers without the chaperoning presence of Mrs. Betts, and she was surprised at her own timidity.

"I've brought you a present," he said. "Bought 'em from an Injun squaw over on Ross Fork."

He placed in her lap a pair of small, buckskin moccasins literally covered with bead work in many colors and designs centering about a perfectly formed elk's head upon the top of each moccasin.

"Oh," she said with a little coo of delight, "are these for me?"

"I looked at dozens of pairs before I found one good enough for you," he said smilingly. "Let me put one of 'em on and see if they fit."

She lifted one small foot and slipped it into the moccasin. The fit was perfect, and the soft lining was pure luxury to the girl.

"Like 'em?" he asked.

They were quite the finest things she had seen for over five years and she adored them as only a pretty girl starving for beautiful things can, but she lifted her foot and slipped the moccasin off.

"I—I can't take them," she faltered.

"Why?" he demanded.

"My folks wouldn't like it, and—and—besides, I don't konw you well enough to take presents from you."

"Well, you're going to know me well enough, an' right soon," he said with a laugh, and his arms went about her suddenly and her head was drawn toward his breast.

She could feel his lips brushing her hair. She started to struggle, but common prudence restrained her. They were sitting on the very edge of a forty foot abyss, and at the bottom were sharp, projecting rocks like bayonets ready to impale them if they should lose their balance.

"Quit it," she said sharply. "Don't you dare to maul me just because I didn't wiggle."

"Why, honey girl, don't you know I'm crazy over you," he laughed. "You didn't suppose I rode miles out of my way whenever I was in this country just to talk to Old Lady Betts, or to look at her stale old books, did you?"

At that moment Sadie almost caught a glimpse into Gentleman Joe's flinty soul, but she was only a country-bred girl of twenty-one and in eighteen hundred and seventy country-bred girls were unsophisticated. In her day dreams this man had played a romantic part, and it occurred to her that her dreams might be going to come true. She twisted in his arms and gazed at him wonderingly.

"How do I know you mean that?" she demanded.,

"Why, I've got to convince you, I suppose," he said with his ready laugh, and tightened his embrace.

Sadie was not used to familiarity, and she began to struggle regardless of their perilous position. For a moment Rivers tried to hold her, but even his lithe strength was unequal to the task without danger of both of them wriggling over the edge to their death. He released his hold and turned a bit sick as he realized how extremely precarious was their hold upon the rock.

In a moment she had scrambled to her feet and backed farther into the grotto. He followed her slowly, his teeth flashing in an artificial smile.

"Such a little wild-cat," he said. "You might have killed us both."

"Don't you ever maul me again," she said angrily.

The scare he had got made him resentful, and he suddenly lunged forward and seized her again. She struggled vainly for a moment, until the crackling of a broken stick made them spring apart. Her lips parted in an ejaculation of surprise as she saw Matt Bellany standing angrily before them.

"So this is why you wouldn't go with me, is it?" Matt demanded. Then he wheeled heavily upon Rivers. "Who are you, you skunk?" he inquired.

Gentleman Joe crouched against the rock wall of the grotto.

"An apology will now be in order from you, my man," he said angrily.

In utter amazement at such audacity, Matt started angrily forward with clinched fists, but stopped abruptly as a gun came from Rivers's hip with the supple grace of a striking snake.

"Apologize," Rivers ordered imperatively.

Bellamy swung around and confronted the girl, disdaining the man with a gun, though he fully expected to be shot down.

"I thought you'd be up here this mornin' as you wasn't home when I went to say good-by, an' I couldn't leave without askin' you again to reconsider. But I reckon I know now why you been so cool lately."

"Do you?" she asked coldly.

Bellamy turned back toward Rivers. Gentleman Joe still held the gun, but he was frankly amazed at the other man's lack of concern.

"How long have you known this man?" Bellamy demanded.

"I've kuown him a year," Sadie said defensively.

"So you've been comin' here for a year to meet this girl, but you ain't cared to let any of the rest of us git a glimpse of yuh."

Bellamy's tone was full of contempt, the kind that no man can bear, but his defenseless attitude left Rivers in a quandary. Had they been alone Rivers could have dealt with him promptly, but he knew it would not do to shoot him down in the presence of the girl, and a covert glance at the powerful physique of the young farmer convinced him that it would be unwise to enter into any physical combat. He could only fume helplessly and promise himself future vengeance.

"It's not like that at all," Sadie put in quickly. "We've been meeting at Mrs. Betts's."

"I always knew her head was full of mush," Bellamy said grimly. Then his eyes rested upon the little beaded moccasins. "Did he give you these things?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered defiantly.

In less heated moments Bellamy would

have acted differently, but he was tremendously angry. In the first place he felt that he had been cheated, and despite the girl's explanation concerning the meetings at Mrs. Betts's he felt that the stranger's visits had been surreptitious and dishonorable. Furthermore, like most tillers of the soil, he feared and distrusted the cattlemen, who, in those early days, were reputed to be wild and unlawabiding.

The picturesque raiment of the other man, in such vivid contrast with his own coarse, soiled apparel, was almost an insult. Deeper still in his consciousness was a conviction that the picturesque stranger was a human wolf at heart. In resentful fury he picked up the dainty moccasins, twisted them savagely and threw them over the lip of the grotto.

"Get them for me, Mr. Rivers," Sadie said in a voice trembling with anger. "I'll wear them."

In a moment Rivers was scrambling down out of the grotto to retrieve the moccasins, and Sadie confronted the young farmer angrily.

"Don't you see now how impossible it again," she said furiously. "You'd better be getting back to your wagon, or you'll get left behind—you—you quitter."

With a dull flush on his tanned cheeks Bellamy turned away.

Bellamy had disappeared from sight when Rivers returned with the moccasins. The girl accepted them with a word of thanks.

"Don't you see now how impossible it is for you to think of mating with a hulk like that?" Rivers asked.

Sadie nodded absently. "Will you come down to the house with me and meet my folks?" she demanded half challengingly.

"It's exactly what I want to do," he replied readily. "In fact I've got a business proposition I want to talk over with your father."

As they walked down toward the sturdy figure behind the plow Rivers talked, and as she listened new vistas of hope seemed to open before the girl. She had been reared in a hard and rigorous school, and she knew the value of money through the things which she had been forced to go without. Now this colorful friend whom she had long ago clothed in a glamor of romance was offering a way to make more money than John Black had ever dared hope for in his wildest dreams.

"You may have to help me persuade him," Rivers murmured as they neared the perspiring man behind the plow.

JOHN BLACK had stopped his team at the unexpected sight of a strange man with his daughter. When the wagons had driven off down the gulch that morning he had expected that he and his family would be alone for many months. It had secretly hurt him, but he had obstinately refused to acknowledge it. He had led the little wagon train all the way from Indiana to Idaho, and out of all the vast unappropriated domain of the West he had looked at Desolation Valley and said: "This is the place." The name had come later.

The others had followed his lead unquestioningly, but the promised prosperity had failed to develop. The soil was as good as it looked to be, but the great trouble was drouth. Snow fell abundantly in the winter, but the ground dried fast in the spring, and the rains were light and uncertain.

After the first year they had undertaken a sort of irrigation, but they were unused to it, and the water, which mostly came from melting snow in the mountains, had a trick of failing completely just when it was needed most. To himself Black acknowledged that the others had been justified in quitting, but pride would not allow him to openly admit his mistake. The climate would change, he insisted stubbornly, and all would be well. He knew that there were big cattle outfits scattered throughout the country and he had heard that they made money, but he could not have entered that business even if he had the resources.

The one mission in life that he could comprehend was to conquer the soil. Like Matt Bellamy, he instinctively distrusted the cowboys. To his industrious soul there seemed something entirely too indolent about a man making his living on the back of a horse.

It was, therefore, with thinly disguised hostility that he viewed the approach of his daughter with a man who was plainly a rider by profession.

"Pa, this is Mr. Rivers, whom I met several times over at Betts's place," Sadie introduced her friend.

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Black," Rivers said genially. "I always admire a stayer, and I see that you're one."

"I don't believe in sayin' I'm licked till I am," Black said gruffly, shaking hands with no great degree of cordiality.

"I like to see a man like that. Can't never be a failure. A man like that will twist things to his need. If one thing don't pan out he'll try something else."

"What do you mean?" Black sensed some subtle meaning in the other man's words.

"By sticking here you'll be able to take advantage of circumstances that come up, while these other people will have it all to do over again. In other words, I've got a proposition to make to you that'll net you several thousand dollars a year with a whole lot less work than you've been doing."

Black looked up suspiciously.

"What is it?" he wanted to know.

"My business is buying cattle. There are a number of big outfits in the country on the other side of these mountains that I buy cattle from. I sell to the mining camps up above here, but my business is held back because I have no place to hold my stuff until the market is right. This valley is the logical place for my needs, but I've always held off on account of these other people. Now that you're here alone it'll be just right."

"There's some range here, but there ought to be better ones," Black objected.

"It's not the quality of the range I'm looking for; it's the location," Rivers stated. "Look here: there's just two openings in this little valley. Now, if I had a good man here to watch those two openings and take care of my cattle what short time each bunch will be here, it would be worth a lot of money to me. The buyers wouldn't know how much stuff I had, nor where, and when conditions were right I could spring 'em on 'em. If you want to do business I'll meet any terms you may suggest. I'll pay you a straight salary, give you so much a head for all the stock you take care of, or I'll give you a commission on the profits."

Black deliberated slowly. In spite of his distrust of the range stock business he saw here an opportunity not only to retrieve his fortunes but to vindicate his judgment in staying where he was. He began to ask questions. Soon both Rivers and the girl knew that their case was won.

In the end Black agreed to take care of all the cattle that Rivers might leave in the valley for three dollars a head whether they were left one day or all Summer, and Rivers, on his part, agreed to guarantee that at least a thousand head would be handled. In addition Black was to feed all of Rivers' riders who entered the valley.

"There's just one more condition," Rivers said smilingly. "I've chosen this place because it's so far off the beaten paths and I need secrecy. So if anyone does happen along here and make inquiries, I want you to claim to be the owner of all the stock that's in here. I'll fix it so's it'll be safe."

Black objected instantly. He was a man who followed a stern code in which deceit had no place. Even Sadie demurred strongly.

"But the whole thing would be of no benefit to me if it should happen to come out that these were my cattle," Rivers said impatiently.

"Then we can't do business," Black said with finality.

Rivers's face clouded, but then his eyes rested upon the trim figure of the girl and a hungry look came into his eyes. She was desirable, and he had made up his mind to get her. And if he could make John Black his tool for a year or so it would be worth a lot of money to him. He could afford to make concessions.

"I'll tell you what we can do," he said. "I operate under a company name, and we can change the name of the company so my name won't appear. We'll call it the Desolation Stock Company."

John Black gravely agreed that the compromise would do.

That night Sadie hugged the little, beaded moccasins to her breast. They represented the single bit of luxury that had come to her in more than four years; now they seemed but the harbinger of other and better things, and her heart warmed toward the man who had made such things possible.

BUT the morning brought an augury of trouble. The moment she stepped outside Sadie's eyes lighted upon a thin column of smoke ascending from Matt Bellamy's shack. Scarcely believing her eyes, she ran up a short slope and from there she saw plainly Bellamy's travel-scarred wagon. His four bony horses were grazing in the field nearby.

A wave of anger swept over her at what she considered his unparalleled impudence, and she rushed down the hill, intending to go over at once and tell Bellamy exactly what she thought of him. She grasped instinctively that his presence would embarrass the whole enterprise that promised

so much for the Black family. But before she had gone a hundred yards she checked herself. After all the land belonged to Matt and he had a right to return to it if he wanted to, even though he had done so to annoy her. She would punish him by refusing to recognize the fact that he was on the earth.

After a time, however, her sense of justice prevailed to the extent that she achieved understanding though not forgiveness. She recognized that his motive in coming back had been to protect her from the influence of Rivers, but she denied both his right and the need, and his prospective punishment was not lessened in the least.

It was not long before one of her young brothers discovered that Matt was back and the fact was announced to the whole family.

"Glad he come back," John Black stated matter-of-factly. "He's a good man to have around an' I'll need somebody t' help me in this new business."

Sadie remained silent. Events, she knew, would soon test themselves. Matt certainly would refuse to work for Joe Rivers, and it was possible that he might bring enough influence to bear upon her father to cause the whole thing to collapse, for she was sure that her father's rigid code of honesty would make him balk at going on if he suspected that there was anything wrong with Joe Rivers. She told herself again and again that there was nothing wrong with Rivers, but always there was a small, recurring doubt.

Her fears that Matt might tell what had occurred in the grotto were groundless, for the young farmer had no intention of being a tattle-tale. He had seen what he had seen and had formed his own conclusions that were thoroughly unfavorable to Gentleman Joe Rivers. He had come back simply because he could not bear to think of Sadie being left unprotected in such a place with such a man around, but he had no intention of bringing her father's wrath down upon her. When John Black visited him soon after breakfast that morning Matt explained coolly that he had changed his mind and had decided to try it another year.

"Reckon Sadie had something to do with it, eh?" Black guessed shrewdly.

Matt offered no contradiction.

Then Black sketched the proposition which he had accepted from Rivers.

"You can work for me or go in pardners, just as yuh want, Matt," he concluded generously.

"Know anything about this Rivers?" Matt parried.

"Only what he says, an' the fact that he seems t' be a friend o' Sadie's an' the Betts's," Black admitted with a slight scowl. "But his proposition seems t' be on the level," he added hastily.

"We can't be too sure 'bout what we go into, John," Matt cautioned. "We don't want t' forgit that these people out here are different from us. This is a new, raw country, an' it's only natural that a lot of the people here are tough characters."

"But what d'ye think Rivers could be other than what he says?"

"I don't know, but I don't want t' mix up with him, an' I won't until I investigate him an' find out that he's really what he claims t' be."

"But what'll yuh do for a livin'? You'll starve t' death here tryin' t' farm," Black argued, unconscious of the fact that exactly the same argument had been urged against him very recently.

"Mebbe so," Matt admitted. "But I been thinkin'," he went on slowly, "that there might be a chance yet. Now that the others are gone there may be water enough left for you an' me t' raise our crops, providin' we can hang on to it."

"I don't see no chance," Black frowned. "There's water runnin' t' waste right now, but when we need it bad it'll all be gone."

"Remember that dry, flat canyon we found our horses in the time they got lost two years ago? Well, it's occurred to me that it wouldn't be hard to throw a dam across the mouth of it an' make a reservoir that would hold all the water we need."

"But it's dry, man. It's only a short, blind canyon without even a creek," Black objected.

"True enough. But it's lower than the main creek that comes out of the big canyon, an' we can dig a ditch around the face of the mountain an' turn the whole creek into it. By storing the surplus water a couple of years we can irrigate every farm here."

Matt's voice trembled slightly with eagerness at the vision he had conjured up. The scheme had occurred to him some time before, but because of the discord among the settlers he knew that it would be useless to mention it, and he was really discouraged with the country. Now that this other thing had brought him back and the disgruntled settlers were out of the way, the idea appealed to him more powerfully. He knew it would be a tremendous undertaking for his and John Black's resources, but, as they had nothing to lose and everything to gain, he felt it was worth the effort.

John Black, however, now felt that he had something to lose. The returns from the deal with Joe Rivers would bring in more cash than Matt's scheme could possibly do, and he looked upon Matt's plan as extremely visionary.

"Cost too much," he said with finality. "Besides, the soil here ain't no good. Better come in with me on this other deal, an' mebbe in four or five years we'll have money enough to do things right."

"Can't do it, John," Bellamy refused. "I'll stick to my place an' do the best I can."

For several minutes John Black smoked in silence.

"I'll just about have to have this whole valley to hold them cattle in," he said at last.

There was another long silenee while the men measured each other.

"We've been purty good friends, John," Matt finally said.

The unspoken words meant more than the spoken ones. Both men got to their feet, and a steely look came into Black's eyes.

"Yuh mean then yuh intend to stay here an' cause me trouble."

"Not unless you force it on me," Bellamy said quietly. "But this land is mine an' I intend to keep it an' develop it. We come West for that purpose an' I'm no—no apostate."

"An' I'm goin' into the business that pays me best," John Black said harshly. "You can't expect me to keep cattle off your land unless yuh fence it, an' neither do I want any more settlers a-comin' in here."

BLACK strode angrily homeward; doubly angry because Matt was upholding principles which he himself had strongly fostered. The certain prospect of three thousand dollars a year obscured other things. Matt's project, he knew, must be nipped in the bud. If it should succeed other settlers would appear and that would mean the end of the Rivers business. And so he began to look as an enemy upon the man whom an hour since he had considered his prospective son-in-law.

At noon that day Black first noticed the moccasins on his daughter's feet.

"Where'd yuh git 'em?" he demanded.

"From Joe Rivers," she answered a bit defiantly.

"Ain't bad for summer wear. I'll git yuh some shoes an' stockin's this Fall," he said, and the girl knew at once that he had quarreled with Matt Bellamy. Otherwise he would have objected to her accepting a gift from any other man.

A moment later he confirmed this.

"I don't wan't nary one of ye to go to Matt Bellamy's place, or to even speak to him," he said.

There were exclamations of astonishment from Mrs. Black and the younger children, but Sadie alone expressed her thoughts.

"I'll speak to him if I want to," she said impulsively, and was quite as surprised as the others at what she had said, for she had resolved never to speak to him again anyway.

What had caused her, she wondered, to challenge her father's authority on that subject? It was no light matter; disobedience from his family was the one thing that John Black would not tolerate. Yet, strangely enough, he allowed his daughter's first act of insubordination to pass unnoticed.

The next morning Matt Bellamy was missing, as were two of his horses and the front wheels of his wagon. With this sort of a cart he had gone out for something, and that part of his outfit left behind assured his return. John Black would have given much to know the object of his trip.

When, a week later, Gentleman Joe Rivers, with three riders, brought in a hundred and fifty head of tired cattle Matt had not yet returned. Black cautioned his family not to mention him at all to Rivers.

Before he left the next morning Rivers handed over four hundred and fifty dollars in gold.

"I'm paying this in advance because I figure you may need supplies. You'll need a good man to help you, too, so I'm goin' to send up a trusty man from Ross Fork right away."

John Black carried the gold into the house, and ran his fingers through the shining coins. It had been a long time since he had had that much in his possession and the feel of it swept through his brain like fever. What did farming amount to compared with easy money like this? The beauty of it was that it would continue to flow in in ever increasing streams so long as he could control the valley. And that should be years unless Matt Bellamy should prevail upon new settlers coming in.

With the grim purpose that had caused him to stick to the plow after his neighbors

had given it up, he now resolved that Matt's project should not succeed, and that no more settlers should be brought in.

While Black was in the house Joe Rivers seized the opportunity to speak a few words with Sadie.

"I'm going to bring you something pretty from Ross Fork in a few days, and it won't be long until I take you out of here to see something of the world," he promised.

"Suppose," she said slowly, "that more settlers should come in here. Would that hurt your business?"

He looked at her suspiciously.

"We don't need neighbors," he said curtly, "and we're not going to have any."

She said no more, but she found herself, much against her will, beginning to feel sorry for Matt Bellamy.

AS FOR Matt Bellamy himself, he was too busy to be worried. Having decided to stick to Desolation Valley he had realized that he must go about things differently than he had done before if he was to survive. His money and provisions were practically gone, and his one chance, he knew, was to obtain credit. That in itself had seemed a hopeless task, for he knew no one with money. But he had an idea that homes could be made in Desolation Valley, and he had faith that he could impart his vision to others, though he had failed signally with John Black.

The nearest town of any importance was Ross Fork, fully sixty miles away, a trading post along the Salt Lake and Montana trail. There were mining camps back in the mountains which the town served as point of supply from the stage line and it was also the county seat of a large, loose-jointed county. The agency of an adjacent Indian Reservation was also maintained there, and at the time the town harbored a company of soldiers. These things, together with a number of large cow outfits scattered about, combined to make it a place of some importance.

For three days Matt tramped the streets without finding anyone at all interested in his project. He had gone to the county court-house and had his filing on the reservoir site and the water recorded after the fashion of those days to establish his prior rights, but that was all he had accomplished in that line.

In another line, however, he had been a bit more successful. From the first he had made casual-seeming inquiries concerning Joe Rivers, and he had found his questions answered with a strange reticence. Most people did not care to discuss Gentleman Joe. Two things he did learn were that Rivers was a somewhat noted gambler and that the man carried a reputation as a gunman. It was also admitted that he was a cattle buyer, but the men he questioned fought shy of details on that point with noticeable trepidity.

Then he met Captain Grant. Strangely enough it was the captain who hunted him up. He was a squat, heavily built man of fifty who had once been a captain of scouts, but who had now turned cattleman. Ten thousand head of cattle wore his brand, and it was from his herds that the wagon trains along the freight road were supplied with beef. The soldiers also supplied him a considerable market. He was, without question, the outstanding figure of the country.

"I hear you've got a proposition to irrigate land up in one of these mountain valleys up here," he said.

"Yes, sir," Matt answered. "The land and water are there. All they need is to be brought together."

"What d'ye figger on raisin'?"

"Wheat, oats, corn, potatoes—anything that'll grow."

"No good," the captain snorted. "Too high—too cold."

"The Mormons practice irrigation——"

"You ain't a Mormon," Grant interrupted. "Besides, they've got a permanent population. This country'll have a floatin' one for the next thirty years. Hay is the thing. Can yuh raise hay?"

"Well, wild grass does well where it has water," Matt said doubtfully.

"Then timothy'll grow," Captain Grant said positively. "Now look here: too many people are goin' into the cattle business around here. So far we've been able to winter our stuff out on the river bottoms, but the time's a-comin' when that'll all be done for. Then we got to go out o' business unless we go to feedin' hay. Already cattle buyers are goin' over into Wyoming, where they can cut wild hay for the askin', an' are trailin' cattle over here to swipe our markets. I'd like to see somebody go to raisin' hay out in places like the one you're interested in. If I could buy hay up there I could widen my summer range an' run more cattle."

Eagerly then, Matt drew a map of the little valley on the back of an envelope and

explained how the water could be stored. From time to time Grant threw in a question that showed he knew much more about irrigation than Matt did, but he was not discouraging.

"It's something of a gamble," the captain said when Matt had finished. "Timothy may not do well on that kind of soil."

"But it won't cost much to throw the dam across an' dig the ditches. I can take two men an' do it for a thousand dollars," Matt argued desperately.

"But you can't raise a crop to try it out till next year, an' yuh can't expect people to go in there an' starve that long," Grant objected.

"We wouldn't need 'em yet. I could try it out on my place," Matt urged.

Captain Grant inspected him critically, but with a glint of humor in his eye.

"I'm goin' to take a chance on you," he said presently. "The trouble with most of these people that are comin' out here to break up the country an' farm is that they lack stayin' qualities. They're in one place today an' another tomorrow. Somebody else always reaps the fruit of their labor. The Mormons are different. They stick. But it's because they lean altogether on their leaders. I prefer to put my money on a man who's inclined to depend on his own resources, an' won't quit when the goin' gits rough. I believe you're that kind. You can have your thousand dollars, an' if it works out all right I'll see that we git settlers, an' that you don't lose."

Matt colored faintly. It was on the tip of his tongue to confess that he had once quit the country, and that it was only on account of a girl that he had decided to stay; but he wisely decided to let that pass. Whatever happened in the future, he meant to stick to his guns.

THREE days later he was outfitted with a new wagon, four more horses, plows and scrapers for the construction work, and a goodly supply of grub. It had punched considerably more of a hole in the thousand dollars than he had figured, but Grant had evidently foreseen that contingency.

"Don't worry about expenses," he casually remarked. "If the job ain't done when that's gone yuh can draw on me for more."

Matt murmured his thanks. For the first time in a long while things had begun to look a little bright. Once more the old, primitive itch to conquer the soil was upon him. In his mind's eye he saw Desolation Valley green with pungent, growing hay. He saw his own good buildings going up, saw cattle, horses, hogs, sheep thriving in his pastures. On a porch, protected by a spreading shade tree he saw Sadie Black.

"I'm goin' to give you a good saddle horse, so you'd better buy you a saddle," Captain Grant's quiet voice broke into his day dreams. "I suppose yuh got a gun?"

"Yes, I've got a rifle."

"Better git you a revolver, son—an' learn how to use it. That's the weapon in this man's country. The country is still lousy with road-agents an' rustlers, an' if you ain't careful you're liable to lose your horses. The best way to keep out of trouble in that line is to be prepared for it."

Matt did not wholly approve of the idea of getting another gun, but out of respect for his backer's wishes he purchased a six-shooter, a belt and holster, and a box of cartridges.

"Do you know of any particular people I ought to watch?" he asked Grant curiously.

"Plenty; but the safest bet is to watch everybody," Grant answered laconically.

"What about Joe Rivers?" Matt asked with an assumption of indifference.

"If you ever have any trouble with Gentleman Joe you just hunt for cover," Captain Grant advised urgently. "He's the most dangerous proposition in this country. But you don't need worry about him; you're too small fry."

Matt was badly puzzled as to whether or not he should tell Grant that Rivers contemplated running cattle in Desolation Valley. There was no question but that he owed it to Grant to make the explanation; in fact he knew now that he should have done so at the first. But the certain result of that disclosure would be that the captain would withdraw his support. Now that Matt was beginning to find out just what sort of a man Rivers was he felt the need to protect Sadie was imperative. So, rather than lose his one chance at remaining in the valley, Matt stifled his conscience and kept quiet.

Early the next morning, with two hired men he had picked up, Matt was on his way back. He drove the cart ahead, and his hired men brought the new outfit. The saddle horse was tied behind the wagon. For a while Matt had carried his six-shooter, but tiring of its weight he had

quickly taken it off and deposited it among the supplies.

Just before noon he unexpectedly met four horsemen. They were almost upon him before he recognized that one of them was Joe Rivers. His first thought was of his gun, but it was too late to attempt to get it without attracting attention, so he drove on with his eyes straight to the front, though he covertly watched every move of the man whom he distrusted.

The horsemen made no attempt to give the road until they were squarely in front of the cart. Then they swerved aside, two of them on each side. Rivers stopped his horse and inspected the man on the ungainly cart with a palpable sneer on his face. Matt stopped his team.

"Want something, Rivers?" he inquired coolly.

"Yes; I want to know where you're going?" Rivers demanded boldly.

"Then I reckon you'll have to foller my tracks, for I don't feel called on to volunteer any information," Matt retorted.

He spoke to his team and it moved ahead. For moment he glimpsed a look of uncertainty on Rivers's face, but Rivers and his men rode on.

The moment their backs were turned Matt began digging cautiously for his revolver. When he had it strapped on he saw that Rivers had stopped the freight wagon. Instantly he stopped his cart to await developments, but with a sense of futility. If Rivers started trouble there was nothing he could do. Against four of them, and all expert gunmen he was convinced, he would have no chance. He looked for no assistance from his teamsters.

In this last respect, however, he was a bit mistaken. He saw the man who was driving the four-horse team hang up the lines and climb meekly down over the wheel, but the other man arose in his place and shook a belligerent fist in the faces of the horsemen. His voice, in a rich Irish brogue, came faintly to Matt's ears.

"I'll worrk for who I plaze, blast yez, an' no gun-totin' murtherin' tin horn gambler can make Paddy O'Leary pack his blankets. Come on, ye scum, two of yez at a toime an' I'll crack the bloomin' heads of yez together till yez won't know which one a yez what little brains ye've got belongs to."

Matt saw Rivers point a finger at the fighting Irishman in the manner of announcing an ultimatum, and then the horsemen turned away. One of them offered a stirrup to the man who had left the wagon and the fellow climbed on behind the saddle. O'Leary continued to talk at their retreating backs until they were out of sight; then he picked up his lines and drove up to where Matt waited.

"Why, the bloody cusses had the narve t' order me back t' Ross Forrk. Said the climate wouldn't agree with me up here," O'Leary exploded.

"An' the other man decided they were right, did he?" Matt asked wearily.

"The dirty coward!"

"Have you been here long?" Matt asked.

"A mere matter o' tin days."

"Know anything about the other man?"

"Only that he claims to have wor-rked around Ross For-r-k a couple av years."

Matt nodded comprehension. It all confirmed the fact that Joe Rivers was generally feared throughout the country.

"If Oi'd had a pick handle Oi'd have wint through the whole bunch of 'em," O'Leary bragged.

"Don't carry a gun, do you?" Matt asked.

"Oi do not. A man with a gun in a gradin' camp would loike to git his head busted wid a crowbar," O'Leary grinned.

"Well, we'll go on without another man an' get the work started," Matt said. "They may try to stop us—but I'm a bit Irish myself."

"Oi knew ye was, Boss." O'Leary grinned widely. "Ye may be a little slow gittin' started, but Oi'll bet yez are a hell-driver when yez git a-goin'."

The remainder of the trip was made without incident, but Matt was in no wise at ease in his mind. Rivers had not shown his hand enough to let him know what to expect, but intimidation of the teamsters served warning that he meant to make trouble. Being in the dark as to what form it would take left Matt greatly troubled.

AS HE pulled up the gulch into Desolation Valley just before sunset on the second day after leaving Ross Fork Matt's sense of troubled depression grew more acute. The valley lay drab and uninviting despite the high bunchgrass that covered the ground. For a moment it seemed to him sheer foolishness to think of tilling it. But he had set himself the task of staying there, and he had to do some work to justify his resolution.

He could not bring himself to admit openly that he had returned solely on account of Sadie.

Almost the first thing he saw was the herd of cattle that had been left by Joe Rivers. He knew there would be trouble over them, but the issue was forced sooner than he expected. Just below his shack was a strip of wild hay which sub-irrigated from the main creek that ran through the valley. From it he had always been able to cut enough hay to keep his horses through the winter. Some of the other settlers had also had meadow of the same kind, but all of them had neglected to fence because they had few stock of their own and there were no outside cattle.

Now he saw that practically all the cattle in John Black's care were on his land, and closer investigation disclosed the fact that they had been there practically ever since they had been driven into the valley. That they would have stayed there all the time of their own volition was impossible. There could be no other couclusion than that John Black had herded them there—and the little hay crop had been grazed down almost to the roots.

With intense regret Matt realized that his old friend had deliberately set out upon a campaign to run him out of the valley. It hurt. Not only on account of the loss he might incur, nor even upon Sadie's account; but because he had valued John Black's friendship highly. Even yet he felt no special rancor against Black and he tried hard to grasp his viewpoint.

Black had been too stubborn to acknowledge defeat when the rest had gone, though he must have really grasped the futility of further struggle along the lines he had been pursuing. Then had come Joe Rivers with a proposition that seemed to offer him a way out. It was only natural that he should resent any interference with that plan. He had, no doubt, considered Bellamy's return as pure intrusion after Matt had refused to go in with him. There was much to be said for Black's side of the case, Matt admitted; though why Black should consider it so absolutely essential for him to be driven out was a puzzle. He could understand that Rivers should object to his presence there, but he could not understand why Black should share his bitterness, unless——

Matt spurned the very idea indignantly, but the germ of suspicion planted at that moment flashed up again and again. From the first Matt had been convinced that Rivers was a crook, and what he had heard at Ross Fork had tended to confirm that opinion. It was more than probable that Rivers's cattle buying was largely cattle stealing, but it was hard to believe that John Black could be in collusion with him.

Regardless of the justice there was on Black's side of the case, Matt was firmly convinced that it was his duty to stay, and if to stay meant fight he would fight.

"This is the place," he told Paddy O'Leary. "You can unhook an' care for the horses. I'm goin' to drive these cattle away."

Mounting the saddle horse Captain Johnny Grant had given him, he began to round up the cattle. He had ridden horseback all his life, but he was unaccustomed to a saddle and a trained cow-horse under him; and the gun at his hip, which he had worn since his encounter with Rivers, made him self-conscious. Nevertheless he headed the cattle straight for John Black's house. He noted, too, as he went, that there was a wide variety of brands on the cattle.

It might be all right, he reflected, since Rivers was presumably a cattle buyer, but he knew enough about the cattle business to know that most of the outfits were large and there were not likely to be ten or twelve different brands in a bunch of a hundred and fifty cattle. Still, it could happen and be quite all right.

He had the cattle within three hundred yards of Black's place when he saw his neighbor striding forward. Flanking him on each side was one of his small sons. Matt had always been a favorite with the boys.

"Hello, Dick; hello Jim," he called out cheerily in greeting.

The boys failed to respond to his greeting. Instead, they dropped behind their father and glanced at Matt curiously. It was another sign of Black's relentless purpose, and it also hurt.

"Where you goin' with them cattle?" Black demanded belligerently. His eyes fastened on the gun at Matt's hip with ill-concealed scorn.

'I'm bringin' 'em back to yuh, John—if they happen to be in your charge," Matt said as pleasantly as he could, though he felt his temper rising.

"You let 'em alone after this," Black growled.

"I don't think I will when they're on my land," Matt retorted.

"They ain't on your land now, are they?"

"No; but they have been, an' they've eat down my meadow."

"Keep your land fenced if you don't want stock on it."

"What about the agreement we made here to take care of our stock so we wouldn't have to go to the expense of fencin'?" Matt demanded.

"That was before yuh throwed up your tail an' pulled out. Any understandin' we had then is ended. You quit like the rest of 'em an' I started in a new line. I'd a right to. Now you come back an' horn in with the intention o' puttin' me out o' business. One of us has got t' leave all right, but it won't be me," Black declared angrily.

"You got it wrong, John. I offered to take you in with me on this irrigation project," Matt said.

"An' I offered t' take yuh in with me on this cattle handlin', but yuh sneered at me," Black came back.

They were not getting anywhere, and Matt realized it.

"Take your cattle, John, and take care of 'em," he said steadily. "You done a dirty trick when you let 'em eat off my hay. A week ago I'd have called any man a liar who said you'd stoop to a thing like that, but I don't want you to let it happen again."

"Yuh can't scare me, you gun-toter," Black sneered.

"I'm not carryin' a gun for you," Matt denied with a flush. "I'm carrin' that for your pardner, Joe Rivers. An' while I'm on the subject I'll just say that I found out at Ross Fork that he's no good. Instead of bein' a cattle buyer he's a gambler an' a crook."

Matt's anger had carried him farther than he intended, for he had not intended to make charges until he had proof.

"I'd like t' see yuh make them charges to Rivers's face," Black taunted.

"Oh, hell," Matt said disgustedly, as he turned his horse and rode homeward.

He found O'Leary with the chores done and supper under way.

"Whose dom cattle were them?" the Irishman inquired.

"They belong to the fellow that took our other man back with him," Matt informed. "The only other farmer in this valley has charge of 'em. If at any time you see any of those cattle inside of the four corners that I'm goin' to point out to you you haze 'em off quick an' fast."

"Oi will that," O'Leary promised.

The next morning Matt and O'Leary hauled their outfit over to the mouth of the canyon that Matt had decided upon for a reservoir site. It looked even more promising than he had thought. The mountains on either side crooked in sharply at the mouth of the canyon so that the opening was not more than four hundred feet across. On either side the mountains rose to dizzying heights, but the one on the south receded like the brow of a prehistoric man. Some day there had been a terrific snow-slide there, and the face of that mountain had given way and shot clear across the mouth of the canyon, making a natural dam that graded down from two hundred feet high on the south side to ten feet on the north.

True enough, several channels had been cut through by spring thaws, or summer cloudbursts, but the task of filling them up was not impossible, and one of them would serve as an outlet to the reservoir when properly boxed up. After that the dam could be raised as high as desired. Matt's first estimate was that it could be raised to a minimum height of twenty feet without requiring a great amount of dirt to be moved, and that, he thought, would do for a beginning.

Their first job was to get out logs to construct a cumbersome but sufficient headgate at the outlet, and then they began to move dirt. Matt found at once that Paddy O'Leary was an exceedingly valuable man. For years the Irishman had followed railroad construction work and he knew grading as he knew the use of his own fingers. His one failing apparent at that time was that he was a poor horseman, but, as Matt was unusually skillful in that line, they got along fairly well.

In the hard, dry soil of the canyon bottom it required their eight horses to pull the massive grading plow. Matt did the driving and the Irishman held the plow. It was work that only a physical giant could stand. Often as the huge plow tore through the hard crust of the ground the Irishman was shaken about like a rat in the mouth of a terrier, but he never relaxed his hold on the plow handles, and somehow always managed to keep the plow upright.

O'Leary had more difficulty handling his team on one of their two wheeled-scrappers, but, as the horses soon learned to make the circle from the loose dirt to the top of the dam of their own will, the work progressed more rapidly than Matt had dared to hope. Long before the summer was over he felt sure he would have water pouring into his reservoir.

TWO weeks slipped by uneventfully. Matt Bellamy was too busy to take note of the air of tense expectency that seemed to pervade the valley, but his neighbors were not unaware of it. Every day they expected the return of Joe Rivers, and with his return would come the crisis that seemed inevitable.

During that time John Black experienced stirrings of conscience. After all, he remembered, Matt Bellamy was a good fellow; level-headed, and as honest as the day was long. He wished, too, that he had taken time to investigate Joe Rivers a little more thoroughly, and, above all, his conscience hurt him for not telling Rivers that Matt had decided to stay in the valley.

Gradually he fought back each one of these pricklings until he had convinced himself that he had acted exactly right; that he hated Matt Bellamy, and trusted and admired Joe Rivers. His great fear was that Rivers would repudiate the contract when he learned what Bellamy was up to.

His daughter's feelings were entirely different, but equally conflicting and complex. Though Joe Rivers had never mentioned marriage to her she felt almost as though they were engaged—at least it seemed certain that they would be. Rivers had declared his intention of taking her away, and she could not imagine herself refusing to go. The little moccasins seemed a symbol of their understanding, and she could scarcely bear to see them getting scuffed up; therefore she wore them very sparingly, though keeping them where she could put them on if she saw visitors coming.

Yet, strangely enough, her feelings with regard to Matt Bellamy were undergoing another change. She had been practically raised with Matt and the understanding that they were sometime to marry had slowly developed with no fire of emotion or romance. It had been entirely commonplace and she had accepted it as an unchangeable matter of fact until Joe Rivers had entered her life. After her humdrum affair with Matt he was as colorful as a rainbow after weeks of fog. Her growing distaste for Matt had reached its climax when he had pettishly thrown away the moccasins.

But deep in the girl was an inborn sense of fairness, and she began to see that the fight that was being made against Matt savored of persecution. Her woman's wit told her also that Matt was staying solely on her account and she was secretly flattered, though she denied it even to herself.

She had continued her visits to her favorite grotto on the side of the mountain overlooking the valley, and it pleased her that from there she could almost see where Matt was working at his reservoir Actually she could not see him and his man except as they happened to be going to or coming from work, but at any hour she could see the little cloud of dust that hung over the scene of their operations, and this permitted her to visualize him in her imagination at work wearily at a hopeless task. Quite without her realizing it, Matt was becoming something of a heroic figure in her eyes, something he had never been before.

At last Joe Rivers came back. Not only had he brought with him the man he had promised to help take care of the cattle in the valley, but he had brought two freight wagons from Ross Fork loaded with supplies for the Blacks.

Black quickly set his wife and Sadie about the task of getting supper for Rivers and his helpers while he hovered about Rivers volubly talking business. But Rivers's handsome face wore a frown and Black could not talk it off.

"I'm not worrying about the cattle," Rivers said at last. "That'll do well enough. I'll have this bunch out of here and others in their place in a few days. I won't keep none of 'em here long enough to hurt anything, and most of the time there won't be any. That is, if I decide to use this place at all."

"Why, what's the matter?" Black inquired, though he knew well enough what the answer would be.

"I told you that my business required secrecy," Rivers said coldly. "The big cattlemen down below are against me. They don't like the idea of me bringing in cattle to cut into their market. That's why I have to have a sort of secret depot for my stuff. I thought I made that plain to you."

"You did," Black admitted.

"But I find there's another man here who is being backed by the biggest cowman in the country; and it seems he's been here all the time. Was one of the men who came in here with you, in fact," Rivers charged.

"He left with the others an' I had no idee he'd come back when you made your proposition," Black defended.

"But you knew he was back here when I brought these cattle in and you didn't say a word," Rivers said grimly.

Black could not deny it so he sought to change the current of the conversation.

"But I didn't know he was bein' backed by anybody," he said. "I thought he'd have to leave right away."

"Well, he'll have to leave right away if we keep our arrangement," Rivers said flatly.

"Who is it backin' him?" Black wanted to know.

"I'm not right sure," Rivers confessed, "but I'm reasonably certain it's old Johnny Grant of Ross Fork. I met this hombre when I was goin' down to Ross Fork last time, and the outfit he was hauling convinced me he was coming up here. I noticed, too, that he had a saddle horse along with Grant's brand on it, and Grant is known never to sell a saddle horse. I made inquiries in Ross Fork and found out that this man Bellamy had tried everybody in town to get backing for an irrigation project out here in the mountains somewhere, and he got it from somebody. Nobody knew Grant put up the money, but that saddle horse makes me think he did."

"An'—an' this man Grant is one of the men you want to keep from knowin' what you're doin' here?"

"He is."

Again Black found himself forced to deceive unless he wanted to risk losing Rivers's favor. Should he tell Rivers that he had told all the plan to Bellamy when he asked Matt to go in with him, it would almost certainly end everything, and now that he had had a taste of prosperity he could not bear to lose it. Then there was his stubborn pride that would not permit him to acknowledge defeat to Matt Bellamy.

"If we could run Bellamy out, d'ye think there'd be any danger o' this Grant sendin' another man to take his place?" he asked.

"Not likely. Grant grubstakes all kinds of people an' when one of 'em fails he just counts it loss and lets it go at that. It would be the same with this fellow. He'd not be likely to make any inquiries unless he should suspect that I was interested here."

John Black experienced a sinking feeling. He knew it was very likely that Grant already knew this through Matt. Reason told him it was best to come clear with everything and end the business, but his natural obstinacy clung to the hope that nothing would come of it if Matt could be persuaded to leave.

"We'll have to git rid o' Bellamy," he said. "How'd yuh figger we'd better go about it?"

"That's up to you," Rivers said coldly. "Generally, in this country when they want to get rid of a man they do it with a gun. Any way you want suits me so long as you get him away before I get any more cattle in here."

BLACK was stung a little by the man's cool assumption, and the calm suggestion that Matt be killed was repugnant to him. His ways of fighting stopped far short of killing.

"I thought mebbe you'd want to undertake the job yourself since Matt's gone to carrin' a gun expressly for you," he retorted.

"What's that?" Rivers demanded incredulously.

"He's packin' a gun, an' he said it was for you," Black repeated.

"He is, eh?" Rivers said grimly. "Well, he'll soon get a chance to use it. Men don't make cracks like that about me and brag about it long."

Too late Black realized the foolishness of his hasty remark. Now he realized that Rivers would have no compunction about shooting a man down. He was beginning to realize that he and his new associate looked at things altogether differently. Back in Indiana there could be furious neighborhood rows, possibly resulting in a few fist fights or law suits, but no one ever thought of killing anybody. Out here, he was beginning to realize, little was thought about sudden death. With a feeling of sick helplessness he began to realize that he was getting involved so deeply that there was nothing for him to do but to flounder through the way he had started.

"Look here, Rivers," he said, "Why should Bellamy hate you enough to pack a gun for you? I know he's naturally peaceful. You said you met him when you was goin' down last time an' you seemed to recognize him. Had you ever met before, you two?"

For a moment Rivers gazed at him narrowly, speculatively.

"We had," he said presently. "The fellow don't like me because Sadie let him drop in favor of me."

"Sadie! Do you mean to say that Sade has——"

"Exactly so. I hope to have the honor

of being your son-in-law," Rivers grinned.

"I never thought o' that. I dunno——"

"Look here, Black. This is the frontier. Four years of rank poverty should have taught you that you don't know much about it. I'm in a position to put you on Easy Street. I can do more for Sadie than you ever dreamed of doing. The only thing that stands in the way is this boob farmer, Bellamy. The only question is, do you stand for getting rid of him or not. I was going to let you do it, but after that crack he made I'll do it myself."

"He—he's got to be got rid of, but—but I want to do it myself," Black floundered.

"All right," Rivers conceded. "Properly speaking it's your job, for you made representations that I would not be molested here. I can settle my personal quarrel with him some other time."

"And about Sadie," Black went on miserably, "I don't think she ought t' be crowded. She's only a girl. We'd prefer, me an' her mother, that yuh wouldn't talk marriage with her yet a while."

Rivers made no answer to the last entreaty but walked off toward the house. After supper Black saw him talking to Sadie, and the heightened color on his daughter's face told him that she was interested. He noticed, too, before Rivers left early the next morning, that he had given Sadie other presents. He wished that he had made Sadie give up the moccasins, but it was too late now.

That night was a sleepless one for John Black. Bloodshed was the last thing he had counted upon when he had made his arrangement with Joe Rivers. Had he foreseen that men might lose their lives he would surely have rejected the offer despite the strong lure of the easy money. Now he was committed to it so strongly that he felt he could not back out.

When the morning came he had gritted his teeth with a determination to see the thing through. First he would see that Matt Bellamy left the valley. Then he would turn his attention to Joe Rivers. He did not believe for a moment that Rivers was a crook as Bellamy claimed he was, but he was doubtful if he was the kind of man he wanted Sadie to marry. He had a deep instinctive contempt for men who habitually carried a gun. Such men always seemed to him to be cowards. He had no fear of them for himself, but he had been forced to believe that Rivers would shoot down Matt Bellamy with the utmost impunity if the occasion offered—and he did not want Sadie marrying that kind of a man.

With a feeling of relief he saw Joe Rivers ride away that morning. The cattle buyer had gone up the single pass that permitted passage from the upper end of the valley, and he had sent the freight wagons back to Ross Fork. Not until then did Black pay any particular attention to the man whom Rivers had brought to help him. He was a smallish man with an evil face, and he wore the inevitable heavy revolver. His name was Whitney.

"You can keep your eye on these cattle," Black directed crisply.

"All right," Whitney agreed. "But it won't take all my time. Joe told me I was to help you with this Bellamy."

John Black recognized the man's eagerness for trouble with a sort of sick feeling.

"I won't need your help now," he said and turned away.

He had to find a way to show Matt Bellamy conclusively that his irrigation project must fail, and as yet he had no plan. If Matt had been entirely on his own resources it would not be so hard to make his task impossible of accomplishment, but now even if his whole outfit should be destroyed he might appeal to his backer; that would be the very thing that would embarrass Rivers. He decided he must do something that would show Matt the folly of persistence.

Later, he left the house on foot and climbed to the top of the hill overlooking Matt's reservoir site. He could see the two men toiling below him and was amazed at the progress they had made. In his upward climb he had noticed along the foot of the mountain, a row of stakes that he knew marked the course of the ditch which Matt proposed to build to fill his reservoir. Coming down again, he followed the stakes to the creek where the water was to be diverted. The line was by no means straight, but he quickly saw that that was not at all necessary. The whole side of the main canyon was a wall of solid rock except for one broken place where the ditch would be taken out, and there was fall enough from that point to Matt's dam so that the ditch did not have to be accurately surveyed. The thing that gripped his attention was that there was but one possible point of diversion. If he could hold that in some way, Matt would be foiled completely.

Black knew little about land and water laws except that they were vague and uncertain. Irrigation was practically un-

known in the territory at that time, and Black had the idea that whoever first actually gained control of a stream could hold it. And he was very near right. If in some way he could gain control of that narrow strip of land his problem would be solved. Suddenly he thought he saw a way to accomplish it.

"Sadie," he said that evening, "it looks like it was up to you to git Matt Bellamy outa here."

"Me?" the girl repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, you. There's just one way t' stop that scheme o' his an' that is to file on the land where he aims to take his ditch out. You're just turned twenty-one, so you can do it."

"But I don't want land," she objected.

"But you don't want Joe Rivers to quit bringin' his cattle in here, an' if we don't fix Bellamy he will," her father insisted.

"That's right," she admitted, but with no great amount of zest.

"Then I'll post location notices, an' in a few days I'll take yuh down to Ross Fork to file," Black decided.

ABOUT three days later Matt unexpectedly met Dick Black while he was out after his horses. At first the boy seemed disposed to run away, but curiosity got the better of him. He understood in a vague way why he had been ordered not to speak to Matt, but he wanted to know how Matt was taking it. The pleasantness with which Matt treated him was a surprise.

"Say, Matt," he said after they had talked a little, "I don't believe you're as bad as they say yuh are."

"Do they all think I'm bad?" Matt asked a bit sadly.

"Ev'ry lost one of 'em. I wouldn't 'a' thought Sadie'd turn agin ye, but she has."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"Pa says her filin' on that land up Big Creek'll be the thing that'll fix you plenty," the boy volunteered.

"What?" Matt demanded.

"Yeah, we been makin' fence there the last three days, an' jist last night pa tacked a paper on it with Sadie's name on it."

Matt waited to hear no more. He hurried his horses home and mounted his saddle horse and rode rapidly up to where he intended to head his ditch. A new, pole fence stretched clear across the one possible right-of-way for the ditch. His eye quickly rested upon the notice Dick had mentioned. He rode up and, without dismounting, read it.

> NOTICE. THIS LAND IS PART OF SADIE BLACK'S HOMESTEAD. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. SADIE BLACK.

A wave of righteous indignation swept over him. The land was utterly worthless, and it could have been taken up for no other purpose than to beat him. But the thing that rankled was that Sadie should be made a tool in the affair. Without pausing to consider consequences, he began to demolish the fence. The poles were insecurely held in place and within an hour the side of the fence that interfered with his work was a total wreck.

With the completion of his work of destruction the fever passed from him, and he was ashamed of what he had done. Not that he was any the less determined to take his ditch out, but he saw that it would have been better to have waited until he was ready to work there and then to have removed only what fence was necessary to give him a right-of-way. That would have left the next action up to the Blacks.

Further thought was cut short by sounds from up the canyon. Not knowing just what might be coming, he prudently decided to withdraw around the base of the mountain. But before he was completely out of sight a bunch of cattle, perhaps a hundred head, came in sight driven by half a dozen riders. Joe River's cattle undoubtedly, he thought. But why, he wondered, had the man chosen this particular valley out of all the square miles of open range in the country still unused? Only one possible answer occurred to him—Sadie.

He rode on to the dam, fully expecting to find O'Leary there with the horses ready to go to work; but the man had not arrived. Impatiently wondering what had happened, he rode on toward his house and met the Irishman just leaving the place.

"What's the matter you ain't——"

Then he paused as he caught sight of a well blackened optic in the Irishman's face. Dropping his eyes, he saw that O'Leary's knuckles were skinned and bloody.

"Holy Mither, boss, it was a foine scrap," O'Leary grinned.

"What happened?" Matt demanded crisply.

"Faith, yez told me t' chase off all the dom cattle that Oi found trespassin' against yez, an' Oi undertook t' do that same, an' the man Black undertook to stop me, an' we mixed."

"An' then what happened?"

"Well, yez don't see no cattle, do yez?" O'Leary grinned.

"Well, anyway, things are comin' to a head," Matt stated. "I done a fool thing a while ago, an' you done another one, but now that we've got things a-movin' mebbe we'd just as well keep on. We'll let the dam go for a while an' start makin' our ditch."

With the eight horses and the big plow they made their way to where Mat had demolished the fence on Big Creek, plowing a deep furrow as the went. It was long after noon when they reached there and they at once turned their horses loose to graze while they ate a cold, belated lunch. They had just finished when they heard a horse splashing through the creek below them. A moment later Sadie Black came in sight alone.

Matt got to his feet hastily and murmured a greeting to the girl. Her face was flushed and she took no notice of the courtesy. Her eyes roamed over the destroyed fence, and then she fixed her gaze with withering scorn on the young farmer.

"Wasn't there a notice on that fence that trespassers would be prosecuted?" she asked in a dry voice.

"There was, but you couldn't expect me to respect it, could you, Sadie?" Matt countered.

"Not after you hiring that brute there to beat up my father," she retorted.

"I'm sorry, Sadie," Matt began, "but I told your father he must keep his cattle off of my land, and——"

"And then you respect my rights by tearing down my fence," she returned scornfully.

Matt twisted uncomfortably.

"I'm afraid you don't grasp all the angles to this," he said. "This land ain't got no value, an' I figgered it was just a scheme of your father's to make my project fail."

"Value or not, I've got a right to it, haven't I?"

"Undoubtedly. But my right to a right-of-way comes first," he told her gently.

"Maybe," she said, "but you've got to prove it. Until you do, you stay off." There was grim finality in her voice.

"But listen, Sadie," he pleaded. "My plan will make homes for a lot o' people. This cattle grazing scheme that Rivers has talked you folks into can't last. Can't you see my viewpoint?"

"I could, pretty near," she said, her voice still hard, "till today. I used to watch the dust rising from that dam you were building and I felt sorry for you, and—and I rather admired you. But today I learned that you—that you're—petty."

The scorn in her voice made him recoil as from the lash of a whip.

"Petty or not," he said doggedly, "I'm goin' to fill that reservoir."

"Yes, you are—not," she sneered.

"How'll you stop me?" he demanded, goaded almost beyond endurance.

"If I ask Joe Rivers to make you leave he'll do it. And he won't go about it in any petty, sneaking, underhanded way. He'll tell you to get out, and if you don't he'll make you," she said angrily.

"So you'd have a gunman and a killer fight for you, would you?"

"At least 'a gunman and a killer' takes his own life in his hands. He's no coward. He don't tear down fences when there's nobody around, nor hire big bullies to beat up men with their fists," she retorted.

"Well," he said, suddenly straightening up and meeting her eye clearly, "if that's the kind of a man you admire I'll try to meet the bill. Send on your gunman—an' I'll try to give him some of his own medicine."

Sadie suddenly wheeled her horse and, splashing through the creek, rode away. Matt's gaze followed her until she disappeared from sight in the timber along the creek. Then he turned to his Irishman.

"Well, O'Leary, it looks like we was on the verge of a real fight," he observed.

The Irishman licked his dry lips. "When it comes to fightin' wid me fists or wid a pick-handle Oi'm wid yez, but this gun talk makes me fale a vacancy in de pit o' me stummick," he said.

"I'll do the fightin'," Matt said, "but we'll need more men to work. One of us will have to go down to Ross Fork an' bring back a couple of men. Then, while the rest of you work, I'll stand guard,"

"Oi don't know as I'm crazy t' stay here alone," O'Leary volunteered.

"Then you ride the saddle horse down an' pick up a couple of men—no, you'd better drive down for you might not git men with saddle horses. It'll take longer, but it'll be safer."

IN THE meantime a troubled-eyed girl was stretched full length in the grass while the horse she had been riding grazed contentedly near at hand. Already she was regretting the quick anger that had sent her up the creek to upbraid Matt Bellamy, and she was afraid that she had gone too far. She had no intention of asking Joe Rivers to drive Matt out of the country; that had been pure bluff, merely to see how Matt would take it. The way he had taken it had come as a surprise to her; there had been a light in his eyes that told her he would stick till the death if need be. She saw tragedy swiftly approaching, and was powerless to avert it.

At last she arose and thoughtfully mounted her horse, one she had borrowed from Whitney, and started toward home. For four years the sameness of life had been well nigh unbearable, and Sadie was aware that she had not grown at all in that time except physically. In the past few weeks events had moved at cyclonic speed, and suddenly Sadie had awakened to the fact that she was a woman instead of a mere girl. She glanced down at the gaily decorated moccasins on her feet. When she had received them it had seemed a red letter day in her life. Now, in comparison to the problems pressing around her, they were very, very trivial.

She realized that she was the instigator of the trouble between her father and Matt, and she saw clearly how it was mauling and wrecking the characters of two normally quiet, peaceful men. Had she never encouraged Joe Rivers there would have been no bone of contention. She did not blame Rivers, and she had not lost her admiration for him, but with her new understanding she began to see him without the blinding light of infatuation.

One thing she understood thoroughly. Both her father and Matt had gone so far that retreat was impossible for either of them. So, if serious trouble was to be avoided she must be the one to save the situation.

The riders who had brought the cattle in that morning, and who had first told her of the demolished fence, had informed her that Rivers would be along about dark that night. The cattle in the valley, they also told her, were to be driven out that night on their journey to market. She knew that she would see him before he left.

The cattle had all been rounded up, and a few of the poorer, weaker ones cut back when she arrived. The riders were lazily holding the cattle in a sort of herd so that they could graze without becoming scattered. Whitney was with them, and they eyed her with half cynical, amused looks as she rode up to turn the horse over to Whitney. They were hard-looking characters and she had a moment of misgiving. Part of John Black's undertaking was to feed and entertain these men whenever they were in the valley. It was not going to be pleasant.

An hour later Joe Rivers arrived. He flung the reins over his horse's neck and walked rapidly up to the front door where Sadie waited. He would have taken her into his arms had she allowed it, but she gave him only a handshake.

"I want to see you before you see father," she said.

He was not at all loath to be led away by her oft of sight of the family. Then he once more attempted to caress her. Subconsciously he had grasped the change in her, and the new maturity only made her the more desirable.

"Look here, sweetheart, don't look so serious," he begged. "I don't want to talk business—yet."

"But I do," she said, holding him off. "I want you to quit bringing your cattle in here."

"Why?" he demanded, his voice suddenly growing harsh.

"Because it's going to cause trouble. Surely you can find some other place."

"What trouble?"

"There has been a fight already, and my father was badly beaten. He's in bed now. I know there'll be more trouble."

"With Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"I'll tend to Bellamy."

"I don't want you to."

Sudden jealousy leaped into his eyes.

"Look here," he breathed hotly, "are you still interested in that baob farmer? I'll tell you now that you're my woman, and I won't have you even looking at another man."

"You're assuming quite a lot," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I haven't said for sure I'd marry you, and if you're going to begin browbeating me now I won't. I won't anyway unless you tell my father the deal is off between you."

He put his hands upon her shoulders and held her so close that she could feel his hot breath on her face. At last she began

to sense the terrific fires that burned beneath his handsome exterior. She sensed that he was a man who meant to have his own way at any price; she began to be afraid of him. Yet he held her admiration as though by a hypnotic spell.

"The only reason you want me to call the deal off is to protect that simple-minded Bellamy, isn't it?" he demanded.

"Yes," she admitted, as though it was dragged unwillingly from her lips.

"Well, Bellamy gets just one more chance," he said.

"You—you mean——"

"I want to see your father alone," he said, turning toward the house.

Once when she was a little girl Sadie had seen a forlorn little calf on a narrow board being washed down the Ohio River during a flood. In its eyes was a look of terror that she always remembered. She had never seen anything quite so helpless. Now the memory came back to her, and she felt that, like the calf, she was being carried along helplessly into a vortex of trouble and disaster. She began dimly to perceive that what had brought all of these men to this new country was, more than anything else, a love of mastery. With her father, with Matt, with Joe Rivers it was all the same. Anything that a woman might say or do to change them would be of no avail.

An hour later she saw Rivers come out and mount his horse. He had looked for her with some eagerness, but she had kept herself concealed. As soon as he had gone she went into her father's room.

"Pa," she said, coming directly to the point, "what are you and Joe Rivers going to do about Matt?"

"We're goin' to give him one final chance to git out," Black said dully.

"Would you kill Matt for the sake of the money Joe Rivers is paying you?" she asked steadily.

"He'll leave when he knows he has to," Black said.

"You know he won't."

"But we can't turn against Rivers now. Why, he paid me three hundred dollars for the cattle that just passed through here today. Matt's only stayin' here to spite us because you think more of Rivers than you do of him. If he keeps on an' gits hurt it's his own fault."

"It's gone too far, Pa. I won't have anything to do with it. I won't file on that land at all up there now. Matt can dig his ditch if he wants to," she declared.

"Then we'll just naturally have to run him out," Black said stubbornly.

With a hopeless sigh Sadie turned away.

THE next morning Sadie got out of bed with an air of resolution. During the night one other possible way of averting the trouble that was surely impending had occurred to her. She got breakfast hastily, and, leaving one of the younger children to take her place at the dish-washing, she slipped away toward Matt Bellamy's house.

When almost to Matt's she was suddenly alarmed by the sounds of six revolver shots fired in rapid succession. She knew they had come from Matt's barn. Her heart leaped into her throat, but she headed for the barn on a run. Just before she reached it there came six more fast shots. The last one sounded just as she rounded the corner. She stopped short with a look of blank amazement on her face. There was nobody in sight but Matt, and he stood there with a smoking revolver in his hand and a foolish look upon his face.

"Matt what were you doing?" she demanded.

"Practicin'," he said a bit defiantly.

"Listen, Matt," she said speaking rapidly, as though she were spurring herself on desperately, "if I had went with you when the others left, you wouldn't have come back here, would you?"

"Why, no," he said wonderingly.

"Then will you leave this horrible hole if I'll go with you now?" she asked.

A look of pleased surprise came into his face, only to fade out almost instantly.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, though a blush crept over her cheeks.

"It won't do, Sade," he said slowly. "If you really thought enough of me it might be different, but you don't—yet. Down in your heart you think more of Rivers than you do me. It's too late anyway. I've spent money here that belonged to another man. I can't pay him back, an' I can't just lay down an' quit. An', furthermore, I'd be all kinds of a coward to leave after that notice they left on my door last night. You called me a quitter once; you'll never have cause to again."

"Notice? Did they leave a notice?" She shivered.

"I'll show you," he said.

Matt led her to the front door of his

shack, and in the center of the door was tacked a white sheet of paper, with this hand written warning:

Matt Bellamy:—You have been warned to leave Desolation Valley. This is the last warning you'll get. If you ain't beyond the valley by twelve o'clock today you'll never get a chance to leave!

It was unsigned, but she noted with a little relief that the handwriting was not that of either her father or Joe Rivers; though she knew one of Rivers's men must have written it.

"They mean it, Matt. Don't you see that they'll kill you? There's too many of them. Please go. If you won't take me, go alone."

For a moment he was silent except for a nervous tattoo he beat upon the door with his fingers.

"It's simply impossible, Sadie," he maintained. "If you went with me you'd always hate me, and I'm damned if I'll leave you to Joe Rivers even if you do hate me. That's enough, aside from the other reasons I give. You're probably sorry for settin' Rivers on me, but I know you was mad, or you didn't realize the consequences. It would probably have come anyway, an' I'd rather have it out with Rivers than with your father. I'm ready for 'em to come."

Sadie realized the futility of further entreaty. Not one of the three men would give an inch. She turned away and walked slowly homeward. Must she give up her fight to save trouble after all? Then, suddenly, another forlorn hope sprang into her mind. She knew little about Ross Fork, but she knew there was a company of soldiers there, and in some vague way they seemed to her to represent the law. If she could get to them and explain that the men in Desolation Valley were planning to kill one another surely they could do something to prevent it. The problem was, how could she get there?

She had stopped beside a thick clump of willows to consider her problem, and she dodged further out of sight as she saw Matt riding away on his saddle horse. She had noticed the animal staked close to Matt's barn, and knew that he must have saddled up almost immediately after she had left. He passed close to her, and before she dared to move he came back driving four work horses.

Sadie did not know that the Irishman had started for Ross Fork the evening before with the other four horses. Indeed, she was thinking of but one thing: if she could but get hold of that saddle horse she could get to Ross Fork. Her father had no saddle horses, and she knew he would not permit her to have a team. Whitney would not let her have his saddle even if he would loan her one of his horses.

Dodging from bush to bush she followed Matt back. He corraled the work horses and, dismounting, left the saddle horse standing with the reins dragging while he proceeded to drive the work horses into the barn. The girl knew instinctively that he would spend some time inside currying the horses; meanwhile the saddle horse was grazing in a half circle to avoid the trailing reins. He was gradually getting closer to where she waited.

Finally the horse was considerably closer to her than he was to the corral. Gathering her courage in both hands she walked out to the animal. Once the bridle reins were in her hands she felt a shiver of dread, but as Matt still had failed to notice she swung lithely into the saddle and turned the horse toward the road that led to Ross Fork.

Then she heard Matt shout. Without looking back she leaned ahead and touched the horse's sides with her heels. He responded instantly by breaking into a run. She half expected to hear a bullet whistling after her, but she heard no further sound from Matt.

She knew it was a desperate venture she was undertaking, and a humiliating one. Her clothes were certainly not what she would have chosen to go into town with, and she had but a dollar in her pocket; yet she would not better her condition any by going first to her home. Sixty miles was a long ride, but she felt that she was equal to it, and the horse seemed all that she could desire. It seemed absolutely her last chance to prevent the murder of Matt —and perhaps others.

Sadie reached the outbound wagon road and passed around the bend where she had thought she had seen Matt for the last time. She wished bitterly that it had been the last time. Then she struck into the long, narrow gulch where the high hills crowded close from either side.

She leaned over to pull her skirt down over a bare knee, and at the same instant something struck her with terrific force. She experienced a sudden, sharp pain, and then everything turned black. The horse gave a startled jump and the girl pitched headlong from the saddle. With a wild snort the horse galloped madly on down

the wagon road. What had happened, together with the rifle shot, would keep him from coming back that way of his own volition.

A MAN came scampering down from the trees far above, a smallish man with an evil face. His face wore a satisfied grin at sight of the huddled figure in the road until he suddenly recognized who it was. Then his face went white and he gave an exclamation of fear.

"My Gawd, what'll Joe say to this?" he whimpered.

It was Whitney. It was he who had been ordered to write the warning and leave it on Matt Belamy's door. He also had been told to ambush Matt in the gulch, providing the young farmer decided to heed the warning. He had seen Matt only from a distance, but he had observed his horse closely several times. When he had seen the horse coming with such haste there had been not a doubt in his mind that the rider was the man he was to get. Thereafter he paid more attention to his rifle than he did to the rider until he drew his bead, and it had been a long shot.

Blood was forming in a sticky mass upon the girl's black hair, and the assassin had no doubt that he had killed her. He had aimed for a body shot, but her sudden lean ahead, he figured, had brought the top of her head directly in line with his bullet. He knew very well that Gentleman Joe Rivers would exact a fearful vengeance for his blunder. His one chance was to escape before Rivers heard of it.

Whitney had concealed his horse half a mile back, and a considerable distance from the wagon road. He started back toward it hurriedly. He had remounted and was just turning into the road again when he suddenly came almost face to face with the man he had intended to murder. Instantly he saw a way out of his predicament. His hand darted toward the revolver at his hip.

Matt saw the movement too late to avail himself of his own gun even if he had been quick-witted enough to use it, or fast enough to beat the other man to the draw. As a matter of fact he was not habituated enough to a six-shooter to even think of it. Instead, at the first menacing movement he had sighted he had kicked the work horse he was riding in the ribs, and the heavy animal had lunged ponderously and with unexpected swiftness against Whitney's saddle horse, nearly bowling it off its feet, spoiling the aim of Whitney's first shot completely. The next moment Matt had seized the little killer by the wrist and dragged him to the ground.

Whitney was not hard to handle, once he was powerless to use his gun.

"You murderin' little rat you," Matt said angrily, and cuffed the fellow with the flat of his hand.

He was at a loss what to do with the fellow. He was anxious to go on and see, if possible, what Sadie was up to, but it was hardly advisable to turn loose a man who had just deliberately tried to murder one.

His eye chanced to fall on the lariat on Whitney's saddle, and he dragged the little killer over to the horse and untied the rope. In a few moments he had Whitney securely tied to a tree. He took the fellow's revolver and shoved it under his own belt. Then, turning his work horse loose to find its way home, he mounted Whitney's horse and, without waiting to let out the stirrups, again started in pursuit of the girl.

The sight of her huddled form in the dust of the road brought him up short with a gasp of horror. In a second he was on the ground. He raised her head and wiped the blood and dirt from her face as best he could; then he began to examine her for signs of life.

She was not dead. With that realization came more collected thought, and presently he was able to form a reasonably accurate conception of how she had come to be shot. At least he was certain that Whitney was the man who had shot her, and that Whitney had thought he was shooting him on account of the horse. A hard, metalic light came into his eyes.

At that moment a significant change came over him. He realized that though he had been expecting trouble all the time he had been hoping that it would not come. His attitude was that of an Eastern farmer who would defend his own when attacked, but now he saw clearly how futile that defense must of necessity be against such men as Whitney and Joe Rivers. He perceived clearly now that his whole attitude must change. All the inhibitions of his docile training must be ruthlessly trampled underfoot. From now on he must take the aggressive.

At that moment the spirit of the West really claimed him for the first time. His blood surged through his veins with a quickened sense of power.

He picked up Sadie and carried her gently to the creek a hundred yards distant. There he laid her gently in the shade. Carrying water in his hat, he bathed her wound and her face and bandaged the wound roughly with strips torn from his shirt. This accomplished, he mounted Whitney's horse and rode rapidly up the gulch into the valley. He passed Whitney without speaking, but the look he gave him made the little murderer turn cold. He twisted and struggled vainly against the ropes.

Matt rode boldly into John Black's yard and shouted. Black himself came to the door. The farmer's face was still badly swollen, and the fresh scabs did not better his appearance.

"Git off my place, you," Black rasped at once.

"Hook up your team and go down the gulch after Sadie," Matt said sternly. "She's been hurt."

'What?" Black gasped.

"Git your team an' some blankets," Matt repeated hotly. "Don't stand there blinkin' at me, an' don't be makin' any war talk. Drive straight down the road an' I'll meet you an' show yuh where she is."

He wheeled his horse and galloped back down the road. In front of Whitney he stopped his horse and leaped to the ground.

"I've got a few minutes to spare with you now," he said evenly. "And that's all I need," he added ominously.

In the loose end of the rope he began fashioning a hangman's knot. Whitney's glassy eyes began to pop with terror as he realized what his captor intended to do.

"My Gawd, don't hang me," he half screamed as Matt carefully adjusted the noose around his neck, pulling the knot up under his ear.

"I'll admit it's too good for yuh, but it's the best I can do under the circumstances," Matt said grimly.

"If you do the gang'll git you," Whitney threatened weakly.

"They can't try any harder than they will anyway," Matt retorted.

Suddenly all self-control left Whitney. He flung himself against the rope that bound him to the tree, frothed at the mouth, and uttered half incoherent threats and pleas. Matt went steadily on with his preparations for a hanging.

"Look here," Matt said finally. "What'll you give for just one hour more of life?"

"Anything—anything!" the wretched little gunman promised.

"Then talk fast an' straight. Who is in 'the gang' you mentioned? What's their business? An' what are they doin' in Desolation Valley?"

The stern, unemotional tones of the rancher held out little hope to Whitney, but the little gunman felt that, such as it was, he must make the most of it. He began to talk, and he told the truth.

MATT was not greatly surprised at what he heard. Gentleman Joe Rivers was the head of a gang of rustlers that numbered twenty men at full strength, and that operated in two territories. Just why Rivers had selected Desolation Valley as a place to hold the cattle he had stolen in Wyoming until he could dispose of them in Idaho, Whitney did not know—except that the place was isolated and so seldom visited that it was handy to the rustlers' trail, and that there was a man there, John Black, who was a convenient tool, and who could be made the scapegrace if occasion required. Matt could supply the other reason for himself.

As Whitney finished his confession concerning the way he had happened to shoot Sadie by mistake they heard a wagon coming at a fast trot and the man shut up like a clam. A little later John Black drove into sight. In the wagon with him was his wife and the boys, Dick and Jim.

"Whoa!" Black yelled at his team, and the people in the wagon gazed in stupid wonder at the spectacle that met their eyes. "What's this mean, Matt Bellamy? Where's Sadie?" Black demanded.

"Right on down the road," Matt said. "Follow me."

"Mr. Black; turn me loose!" Whitney implored.

Matt had made sure that Whitney could not escape and had swung on the man's horse.

"What's the meanin' o' this—an' of that hangman's knot?" John Black bellowed, making no move to start his team.

"He shot an' killed Sadie an' is tryin' to blame it on to me," Whitney screamed, calling on his latent cunning.

"So you've gone to the dogs entirely, have you. If you've touched Sadie you'll swing for it," Black quavered angrily at Matt.

Matt laughed harshly.

"Come on," he said curtly, "Sadie isn't dead. She needs help."

"First I'm goin' t' turn Whitney loose,"

Black said, and started to climb down over the wheel.

"Pick up your lines!" Matt ordered.

Glancing up, Black was startled to find himself looking into the barrel of Matt's revolver. Before, he would have disdained such a gesture, being sure that Matt would not dare to shoot, but now there was a look in the younger man's eyes that told him there was no trifling. In dumb stupefaction he picked up his lines and drove on.

They found the girl as Matt had left her, still breathing regularly. Matt kept in the background, considering that to be his proper place while her parents were there, but as he gazed at the white face of the girl a wave of emotion almost mastered him. With a sense of shame he became conscious of his own blundering. Had he acted differently he felt that this tragedy might have been avoided.

Yet, now that he actually knew what kind of a man Joe Rivers was, he was glad that he had decided to stay in Desolation Valey. It was better for the girl to die than to become mixed up with Rivers. But she had been big enough, despite her love for the outlaw, to give up everything to save his, Matt's, life. Suddenly he realized that his own love for her, if it could be called such, had been of a proprietary nature—fundamentally selfish. It was now big and clean. If she should recover he determined that she would find an entirely different Matt Bellamy from the one she had known.

Matt was not unaware of the glances full of hatred and distrust which the Blacks, husband and wife, covertly gave him. Of course they believed Whitney's suddenly blurted lie, but it did not trouble him greatly. He would make Whitney come across with the truth later, and this was not the place for lengthy explanations.

"You take Jim an' go back an' take care o' the house an' the other kids, an' don't yuh dare t' leave the place till we git back," John Black ordered his eldest son. "It looks like the only chance t' save Sadie is t' git her to a doctor so me an' ma is takin' her on t' Ross Fork." Then he added as an after-thought; "An' don't yuh dare speak to that—that murderer, or I'll skin you alive."

"Look here—" Matt began, but the stoical, eloquent backs of Black and his wife told him how useless it would be to argue with them, and he certainly would not use coercion to make them believe in his innocence.

He glanced into the wagon and saw that they had forehandedly provided for the trip to town. That, of course, was the thing to do.

Silently he watched John Black drive away down the road with his wife holding Sadie's head in her lap; then he turned his attention to the two boys. They had moved off up the creek through the thickest brush they could find, and Matt realized regretfully that it was because they had the vague idea that he would not follow them there. They were afraid of him. He began to consider the consequences of the Blacks going to Ross Fork.

Certainly they would tell there that he had shot Sadie. If they found Rivers first they would probably tell him, and he would keep them from telling the authorities for reasons of his own. In any event Matt could certainly expect enemies to arrive before very long. He knew, too, that he might have difficulty proving his innocence if the officers came, for Whitney was now almost sure to repudiate his confession. Whitney's disposal suddenly loomed as a problem.

He rode back to where he had left the little killer and, stopping his horse in front of him, surveyed him silently until Whitney began to squirm uncomfortably.

"Was you tryin' to commit suicide when you made that crack to Black?" Matt asked finally.

Whitney wet his lips.

"You—you dassn't kill me now," he said. "What I told the Blacks 'll hang you unless I tell the truth."

Matt realized that the fellow probably spoke the truth. Various schemes for dealing with him went through Matt's mind, but there seemed to be some objection to every one of them. He couldn't turn the man loose after what he had done to Sadie, and it was going to be next to impossible to keep the man prisoner. He was actually sorely tempted to hang the man on the spot and have done with him. If only he had not sent O'Leary away——

Almost simultaneously with the thought O'Leary himself appeared. The Irishman was riding one of the work horses and leading the other three.

"Oi broke the bloomin' king-bolt out o' me wagon an' had t' coom back," he explained loudly. Then as he caught sight of the man tied to the tree his eyes bulged with astonishment. "Boss, what in the divil has been happenin'?" he demanded. "First whin Oi was tryin' t' fix me wagon yer saddle horse coom flyin' by me wid he stirrups flyin' in de wind. Thin

I mates the Black family an' the ould man loike to have bored holes in me wid his eyes; an' thin I foind yez, boss dear, all ready t' hang a man."

In a few words Matt explained what had happened.

"One of us has got to go to Ross Fork an' git word to Captain Johnny Grant about this rustling gang," he concluded.

"The other one will have to keep this buzzard a prisoner—unless he should happen to go back on his confession; then we'll hang him."

"Oi'll go t' town an' niver stop till Oi git there, if yez'll let me take that horse," O'Leary offered, though he failed to meet his employer's eye.

O'Leary had one great weakness, a love for strong whisky, and his throat burned with the craving. It had been almost more than he could bear to come back after he had broken the wagon.

"All right," Matt said. "We'll change outfits right now an' you can start."

He gave a few detailed instructions to the Irishman and watched him start. Then he turned his attention to his captive.

"If you intend to stick to the story that I killed Sadie Black," he said, "I'd just as well string you up an' be done with it."

Evidently the gunman remembered his previous experience with this calm, baffling man and a rope; he had no desire to repeat it. Once more he began to cringe and whine.

"Oh, shut up," Matt said, disgusted.

The killing mood had passed from him, and he had little doubt that at the right moment Whitney could be made to tell the truth again.

BACK at his cabin there seemed nothing for Matt to do but wait. O'Leary would pass the Blacks and get into Ross Fork long before they did. The Irishman had said that he had seen nothing of the cattle driven by Rivers and his men, which indicated that they had left the main road. This all favored the chances that Captain Grant and his men would be the first ones to get back into the valley. Matt made his prisoner secure; then he set about preparing for an attack should things not turn out as he expected, and Rivers's men be the first ones back. It would be the next night at the very earliest, he was sure, before anything developed.

Just before sundown he left his prisoner firmly anchored to a bunk and made his way to a rise in the valley that commanded a view of the wagon road where it entered the narrow little valley. He was within easy sight of the Black homestead but he thought little of that. He was sorry for the children there, and sorry that they had been turned against him, but they were tough little animals and would be quite all right.

The slanting rays of the setting sun fell across the valley and on the dead looking soil of the abandoned fields of the homesteaders. Matt frowned. Could he only be permitted to finish his irrigation project despair would be turned to hope, trouble to tranquility. There was no sign of anyone entering the valley that night. His prisoner was all right; there was no need to hurry home, and so he fell into a retrospective mood.

At last the encroaching twilight warned him that he had better return to his cabin. It was getting chilly, for the valley was high, and he hurried. He had supper to cook also. He was fifty feet from the cabin before he discovered anything amiss. Then he saw that the door, which he had left shut, was open. Breaking into a run he dashed into the house with his revolver in his hand. The ropes that had bound Whitney were on the bunk, neatly severed with a knife, but Whitney was gone.

Matt's mind leaped instantly to one vital point. Whitney had not cut himself loose. He wondered why the fellow had not waited to assassinate him when he returned, and had the answer immediately. He was still wearing Whitney's gun as well as his own, and he had carried his own rifle. O'Leary had taken Whitney's rifle on the saddle. Whitney, then, had been unarmed, and so had his rescuer.

Suddenly Matt ran out and raced hurriedly toward the Black home. He cursed his own folly for not considering the Black boys. They considered him an enemy and Whitney a friend. Despite their father's orders it was only natural for them to spy, and when he had left they had availed themselves of the opportunity to release Whitney.

He knew that there were probably no firearms at the Black place, so it was certain that Whitney would get out of the valley as soon as possible. The only way for him to do that was on one of Black's work horses without a saddle. There might yet be time to head the fellow off.

Matt found all the Black children out to view his approach, and young Dick stepped out to confront him defiantly.

"Where's Whitney?" he demanded.

"None o' your business," the boy answered.

Knowing how useless it would be to quarrel with them Matt hurried on toward the barnyard. He knew Black's horses as well as he knew his own—and one of them was gone.

He stopped by Black's corral, and crimsoned as he thought of the warlike figure he cut in the presence of the Black children with his rifle and two revolvers. There was little time for self-consciousness, however, for he sensed fully that the time for deciding who was going to be supreme in Desolation Valley was near at hand. The question was should he remain in the valley and wait for events to take their course, or should he go out and try to get in touch himself with his one possible supporter, Captain Grant.

The latter course seemed advisable, despite a strange reluctance to leave the valley. Notwithstanding what the Black children had just done, he owned to a feeling of responsibility to them. It was certainly no place for a family of children to be with no adult to watch over them. Shaking off this feeling Matt turned homeward again and caught his fastest work horse. It was dark by the time he had done this, and he was hungry. He built a fire and cooked supper, and as he ate he prepared a pile of sandwiches to take with him.

Suddenly he paused with a mouthful of bread and meat still unchewed. From outside he had caught a sound that seemed to carry some hidden menace. Almost involuntarily he blew out the light, and the same second a bullet ripped through the window close by his head. Matt drew his own revolver and fired swiftly three times through the window. Then he crept to the door and cautiously opened it an inch. He could see nobody, and he knew that his shots had at least momentarily thrown somebody's plans out of joint.

"Spread out an' circle the cabin, fellers, an' if he don't come out we'll burn it," he heard somebody say.

Realizing that his position was untenable in the cabin, Matt turned back inside. In a moment he found a clean sack and thrust into it the sandwiches he had made. Then, opening the window opposite the one through which the bullet had come, he leaped outside. His destination was the brush along the creek a hundred yards distant, but just before he reached it he heard a yell of discovery. Just as several bullets whistled about him, he dived into the protection of the brush.

His chances of escape were narrow. The willows that fringed the creek were sparse and offered slender protection at the best. Then, too, he heard some one shout orders for the mob, or posse, whichever it was, to split up, half to go down the creek and half up until they were sure they had distanced their quarry, and then to turn and follow the creek until they met. It was good strategy, and he knew that he would be caught like a rabbit in the corner of a rail fence unless he left the creek.

Laboriously he crawled on hands and knees for a hundred yards, then flattened himself to the ground as several horsemen thundered by almost within whispering distance of him. The darkness and the men's haste to head him off alone saved him. He was amazed that there should be so many men; there must be, he decided, nearly a dozen.

In a few minutes Matt knew they would be coming back, and those few minutes were his time of grace. He got up and ran as he had never run before, yet with his head as low as possible and his rifle trailing. Fortunately for him he knew every foot of the ground, and so was able to choose small swales and gulches that protected him somewhat. His course was carrying him up the valley instead of down, and he dared not change.

For half an hour it seemed that he had thrown his pursuers off the track; then, after they had discovered he had left the brush, he heard them after him again. They must know that he had come that way, and so it would be but a matter of time until they ran him down. Even if he eluded them all night daylight would bring his undoing. The only thing to do was to find some place that would afford some protection and try to make a stand until help arrived. The one place that he could think of was his dam.

He did not know the hour when he finally stumbled over the dam, but he knew he was unutterably weary—and his pursuers were so close behind him that he could occasionally hear their yells. Once he had heard the snarling voice of Whitney so close that he could have drilled him with a rifle bullet. The temptation was great to end the career of the rotten little assassin, but he had wisely stayed his hand. He knew now that he had gone as far as he

could; his fatigued body could endure no more.

Matt dropped at once into the head-gate which he and O'Leary had boxed up with logs, and his foot squashed into something soft. Mud! A step farther and there was a small stream of water. He almost shouted with elation. He had forgotten all about the furrow which he and O'Leary had plowed up to Big Creek, but, shallow as it was, it had been sufficient to guide a portion of the water all the way to the reservoir.

He dropped down and took a long drink, and then he felt better. With more interest he took stock of his refuge. The place was almost impregnable. He could withstand a siege as long as food, water, and ammunition held out. No bullets from his enemies could pierce those strong log walls, reinforced as they were by the body of the dam, while over the uneven ends of the logs he could command a clear view of every direction. His enemies might overpower him by rushing the dam, but it would be deadly for them.

Matt heard them coming; saw two horsemen loom up out of the darkness. He raised his rifle and fired, and despite the poor aim he was able to take he saw a man slither from the saddle. That shot, he knew, meant that his last chance to get away had gone. His enemies were in front, and the walls of the reservoir were unscalable from the inside. His one hope was that help would come. He tried to speculate upon what hour O'Leary would reach Ross Fork, how long it would take him to find Captain Grant, and how long it would be before Grant arrived.

As a matter of fact, O'Leary had ridden his horse hard and arrived in Ross Fork before the saloons closed. At once he had proceeded to get gloriously drunk.

Daylight showed Matt his position more clearly, but it also enabled his enemies to get a line on the strength of his position. Bullets were singing unpleasantly close overhead, or burying themselves harmlessly in the logs and dirt. His enemies were not showing themselves, so he judged it was to be a siege. He dared to hope that they would not discover the little stream of water, but, in the event that they should, he scooped out as large a hole as possible and let it fill with the muddy and none too cool water.

Presently bullets began to drop from overhead, forcing him to keep pretty close to the bottom of his shelter; proof that his enemies had climbed to the top of the reservoir wall from the outside. That meant that they must have crossed his ditch, and indeed it was not long until the water ceased to flow.

Grimly he settled himself to wait for relief. The yellowish water evaporated rapidly, or sunk into the thirsty soil, and the sun that seemed to smile at him mockingly as it passed over his horizon grew hotter and ever hotter.

SHORTLY before sunset two horsemen came out of the gulch and topped the rise that gave them their first view of Desolation Valley.

"Yep, this must be the place," Captain Johnny Grant announced. "See those stubble fields an' shacks?"

"Long ways out o' the world fer people t' come t' farm," Buck Haines replied.

"Le's dodge back an' hive up in them trees over yonder till we sort o' git the lay o' the land," Grant suggested. "Things don't look just right to me here. I wouldn't think much of the horse comin' back to join the cavy-yard, even with the saddle on an' the reins draggin'—he might just have bucked Bellamy off—but these day-old cattle tracks goin' out, an' these fresh horse tracks comin' back looks queer."

"There's no cattle outfit that we know of that ranges here, an' so far as I know there's no reg'lar cattle trail near here," Buck remarked as they turned their horses.

"Whoa!" Captain Grant ejaculated suddenly. "See that?"

"Naw, but I heard it," Buck drawled, "an' that."

The thing Grant had seen was a spurt of powder smoke. Buck had heard two rifle shots coming so close together that could not have come from the same gun.

"Liable t' be somethin' wrong here," Grant said with a puzzled frown.

"Anyway, we'd better ease ourselves into the situation sort o' mild an' careful till we know what's up," Buck declared.

They left the road and skirted the little valley, keeping under the protection of the fringe of timber at the foot of the mountains till they had worked their way around above Black's place.

"There's somebody livin' there," Captain Grant stated. "You stay here with the horses while I go down an' reconnoiter."

He slipped out of the saddle and began

making his way toward the house. He did not go straight, but angled back and forth, frequently crawling on hands and knees, until the brush along the creek sheltered him.

"Durned if the ole boy ain't a reg'lar scout all right," Buck said admiringly, as he watched his employer's progress.

Captain Grant made sure that he was not walking into any trap when he entered the house. Of what might be in front of him he had no fear. It was an attack from the rear against which he had to guard. He was surprised to find a house occupied only by children, and they in turn were astonished at seeing a strange man unexpectedly inside their door.

"Hello, kids," the captain said reassuringly. "Where's your parents?"

"Gone t' Ross Fork," Dick answered somewhat belligerently.

"Oh, that so? That's too bad. I wanted to talk to 'em," Captain Grant said. His mildness, combined with his air of calm self-assurance, won the boy's confidence.

"You one o' Joe's men?" Dick asked.

"No, not exactly. These Joe's cattle I see here?"

"Yep. A bunch o' the boys brung 'em in here yesterday. Reckon they hurried some, too, when Whitney went t' meet 'em an' told 'em what had hapened here," Dick added. Boyishly, he was bursting to tell the news.

"What did happen?" Captain Grant quickly availed himself of the opening the boy had left.

"Matt Bellamy, dang him, shot, an' mebbe killed Sadie, my sister," Dick said quiveringly. Tears stood in his eyes.

"He did?" Grant exclaimed. "Tell me about it."

In short, broken sentences the boy told how enraged Matt had become because Sadie had filed on a homestead to interfere with his ditch. Then he related the events that had subsequently occurred as he knew them.

"An' I turned Whitney loose an' he went back to meet the punchers he knew was comin' in' an' they headed Bellamy off before he could leave, an' now they've got him corraled over in the dam he was buildin'," the boy finished.

"Is Joe Rivers here?" Grant asked.

"No. But they sent a man after him this mornin' an' we expect him back any time."

Captain Grant stepped hastily to a window and glanced out. He had managed to get a pretty clear conception of affairs in Desolation Valley from the boy's talk. That it was a hangout for Rivers's gang of rustlers he had no doubt. If Gentleman Joe Rivers should find him there Grant would undoubtedly have an unpleasant evening. He knew enough about Rivers to feel sure that the man would not hesitate to commit murder on anyone he happened to find trespassing on what he probably considered to be his own domain. Captain Grant had known for a long time what Rivers's real business was, but like many another cattleman he had never been able to obtain the proof. Now here in this isolated valley the proof might be obtainable.

"Well," he said, "I'll be going. I was just lookin' for a good cattle range, but I reckon Rivers has a first claim on this, so I'll drift."

He knew that in all probability the boy would promptly tell Rivers about his being there, and Rivers would quickly gather who he was from the description the boy would furnish. After that the valley would certainly not a safe place for him and Buck. Nevertheless he determined to have a look at some of those cattle before he returned to Buck.

Grant had not forgotten Matt Bellamy, but he felt that he needed time to figure out what it was best to do concerning him. That Bellamy had blundered in some way he was quite sure, but that he had killed a girl for the sake of his irrigation project did not sound quite reasonable. As he remembered Matt the young farmer was not that kind. At any rate the mere fact of his being besieged by Joe Rivers's men was enough to make the captain want to rescue him.

IT TOOK longer than he had thought to get a good look at some of the cattle, but he finally accomplished it just before dark. Some of the brands belonged to Wyoming outfits that Grant was quite sure would not sell to a man like Joe Rivers.

He turned to Buck Haines and they held a conference. Buck was an old time cowboy, a man of iron nerve and exceptional skill with his six-shooter.

"It's a real job for two of us to tackle Joe Rivers's whole outfit, but if you say do it, we will," Buck declared.

"Chances are we won't have any say," Captain Grant said dryly. "Rivers has

probably got here an' talked to the boy by this time, so we'll have to fight our way out anyway."

Once more the captain returned to the Black house, but this time he was careful not to be seen. It had been a long time since he had called upon his old-time cunning as a scout, but he was pleased to note that he was still able to master the old tricks. There was some excitement within the house, and he was able to get close enough to make out what it was about and, what was more important, to find out what was being done.

Rivers had returned, and he knew that Grant was probably in the valley. Three men had been sent to watch each of the two entrances into the valley and to stop all comers. Eight men were to close in on Matt Belamy to make sure that he did not escape during the night. Rivers and the remaining men, five in all, were to stay at Black's house to await developments.

Grant knew that Rivers had placed his men to the best advantage, and he knew that there was small chance of his being able to send for more men from his own outfit even if there had been time. He felt that he and Buck could fight their way out if necessary, but Bellamy must first be rescued; that was going to be a problem. Also, he had heard a man report that Bellamy could not possibly hold out until noon the next day.

Had it not been for the Black children the captain would have known how to proceed. The longer he thought the more certain he became that the only course was to boldly hold up the men in the house and if possible take Rivers prisoner. This must wait, he decided, until the Black children had gone to bed.

While Buck waited close at hand, the captain hugged the walls of the house, listening until his ears ached. He knew that the five men in the house were playing poker in Black's living-room, the two older Black boys interestedly watching them. It seemed that the boys would never go to bed. When they did it was to lie down upon a pallet in the corner of the same room. Had the boys been in another room Grant and Buck would have attempted a surprise entrance, but the risk of a gun battle in which the boys might be hurt was too great. Hoping that eventually the men would fall asleep, the two waited patiently.

The hours rolled on monotonously, and still the poker game continued. At last Captain Grant decided that action of some sort must be undertaken at once. He withdrew silently to where Buck waited. After he sketched his plan, they turned again toward the house—only to stop short at the rapid thud of horses' hoofs. A moment later two men dismounted and entered the house. Instantly Captain Grant hurried back and pressed his ear to a chink between the logs.

All was commotion inside the house. One man's angry voice was rising above the rest.

"My girl come to, an' she says she knows it couldn't 'a' been Matt Bellamy who shot her. She says it was this runt of a Whitney who must have done it. I rode all night to 'pologize t' Matt, an' t' take this little murderin' brute back t' Ross Fork," the man, whom Captain Grant knew must be the owner of the house, was saying wildly.

A shrill, screeching denial came from the man who had been accused, and another man was trying to explain how he had intercepted Black when he entered the valley.

"Keep quiet," suddenly shot out Joe Rivers's low, tense command, and the noise subsided.

"Now tell your story," Rivers ordered Black.

From the farmer's jerky explanations the man outside judged that the girl had not been so badly injured after all.

"And I suppose you told the officers before you started back here?" Rivers questioned.

"No. I couldn't find the sheriff so I come on an' told my wife to tell the officers in the mornin'," Black replied.

Captain Grant hurried back and summoned Buck. Each stationed himself beside one of the outside doors. The captain knew that Black's arrival had produced a crisis in Joe Rivers's affairs. The rustler chief must take some action at once, for he dared not wait until the officers of the law arrived and found stolen cattle in the valley. Neither would he dare to let Whitney be arrested for fear of what the man might say.

On the other hand a refusal might mean a break with Black. Just how important Black might be to the rustlers the captain had no idea. Then there was Bellamy to complicate matters. Either Gentleman Joe would pull up stakes and acknowledge the game over, or he would do something desperate to try to repress all incriminating evidence. Captain Grant guessed that it would be the latter course. The time seemed ripe for him and Buck to take a hand.

Suddenly the captain smote the door with the butt of his revolver.

"Open in the name of the law," he bellowed. "Close in, men, an' shoot the first man that leaves this cabin," he added almost instantly.

Then he opened the door in front of him, and at precisely the same moment Buck Haines opened the other.

They saw five men standing in stupid awe, but the hand of the sixth man, Joe Rivers, flashed to his hip. Captain Grant involuntarily drew back, and a bullet crashed into the log directly in front of his nose. He raised his arm and fired, but someone had struck the lamp a blow that put it out. It was the signal for the outlaws inside to begin firing.

Remembering that there were children in the house, Captain Grant stepped back and reversed his revolver. His bluff had been called, but he had not lost his presence of mind. A moment later a man rushed out of the door, and the captain's gun descended upon his head with a sickening thud. The fellow sprawled in the dust. The man behind him jerked back enough to make the captain's blow fall upon his shoulder. They grappled, but after a minute of struggling Grant broke loose and swung the butt of his gun heavily against the man's skull. This man also collapsed, but the captain was aware that one man had gotten by him.

The captain re-entered the cabin, but before he could cross the floor someone struck a light. Its flickering gleam revealed only John Black and his frightened children.

"Buck!" Grant called, and a moment later the sinewy puncher stepped into the room.

"I had to shoot one hombre," Buck said matter-of-factly.

"Then three got away," the captain said. "Don't look like we'd bettered ourselves any. Drag 'em in an' le's take a look."

The man Buck had shot was dead, but the two Captain Grant had knocked out were alive.

"Tie 'em up, Buck," the captain ordered. "Mebbe we won't be able to keep 'em, but there's no harm in tryin'. I'm sorry Rivers got away."

"Look here," John Black demanded, "what's the reason o' this? Why are yuh after Rivers, an' why did he show fight the way he did? Where's the rest o' your men?"

"We're after Rivers because he's the biggest crook an' cowthief in this country, an' that explains why he showed fight. As to my men, you see 'em all," Captain Grant explained succinctly.

"Ain't you an officer?" Black asked.

"To all practical purposes I am," the old cattleman snapped.

"But you said for your men to close in —an' who said Joe Rivers was a crook?" Black demanded.

"He ran when he thought the officers were here, didn't he?" Captain Grant retorted.

Black was silenced. The captain stepped to the door and looked out. The first signs of coming dawn were beginning to show.

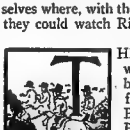
"We can't stay here, Buck, on account o' these kids. Rivers knows by this time that we're shy on numbers so he'll be back after us mighty pronto. I hoped to catch him an', with a gun in his ribs, make him order his men to leave Bellamy alone. As it is I reckon we'll have to go take Bellamy away from 'em ourselves," Grant said.

John Black looked on dumbly. The rapid-fire events of the last few days had left him dazed. He was amazed at the cool efficiency of these men who were not at all disturbed by the proximity of sudden death.

"Look here," he said, "I want to help Matt."

"You do?" the captain demanded quickly. "Then you take your kids an' hit for the brush. At any time me an' Buck may have t' make a dive back here, an' we don't want no kids in the road."

The captain shot a few swift, terse questions at Black concerning the lay of the country; then he and Buck hastily withdrew to where they had left their horses. It seemed a fairly good guess that Rivers would draw away some of the men who were guarding Matt Bellamy and make an attack upon Black's house in the hope of capturing the men who had fooled him. Therefore the two men concealed themselves where, with the approach of daylight, they could watch Rivers's manoeuvers.



THEY had not long to wait. Horsemen could be seen riding rapidly from the direction of Bellamy's dam to Black's house. They counted ten.

"Watch these fellers, Buck; I'm goin' to see what I can do for Bellamy. I hope to God he don't fall for the trap they've laid for him. They've pretended to leave there in a hurry to make him think it's safe to come out. But one

man has stayed behind t' drill him with a bullet."

The captain started immediately, but the timber that had protected him and Buck thus far gave out when he had to round the base of the mountain below Matt's ditch. There were rocks and scattered clumps of bushes, but to utilize them to cover his advance from the searching eyes of the men below necessitated great caution and retarded his progress materially. The sun was throwing a streaming, golden light across the valley floor when he finally reached a place where he could view the dam.

"Bellamy had the right idea about irrigation," he murmured to himself. Then, suddenly, he saw a man's head slowly emerge from the head-gate of the dam. He searched the surrounding brush for a sight of the eleventh man, but could see no sign of him at first. Then his eye caught sight of a peculiar blur behind a sage bush. The range was too long for his six-shooter, but a shot seemed the only way to warn Bellamy. He reached for his gun. Just as his hand touched it there was a puff of smoke from behind the sage he had been watching. Matt Bellamy's head dropped out of sight.

That the shot had gone home was evidenced by the quick, assured rise of the man behind the sage. Angered by the cold-bloodedness of the act, Captain Grant fired —and regretted it immediately, for he knew that his bullet could not possibly do the assassin any harm, and it betrayed his own presence. The fellow, a small man with an evil face, had started toward his victim, but as the captain's bullet dropped harmlessly into the ground a few rods ahead of him he gave a start, and then hurriedly retreated in the other direction. He dropped into a low swale, and a few minutes later the captain saw him come out on a horse and gallop toward Black's place.

Captain Grant ran, or rather plunged, toward the dam. Half in and half out of the place where he had been so long lay Matt Bellamy. The captain turned him over and ripped open his shirt. The assassin's bullet had struck Bellamy somewhere in the chest. The captain had more than a little skill in surgery and he felt that if he only had the man in a house where there was water and a few other simple little things he might save his life. As near as he could tell the bullet had been a little high and had smashed Bellamy's collar-bone, then deflected toward the left shoulder, where it had come out.

To leave Bellamy lying there to die miserably from his wound and from thirst was a thing the captain could not even contemplate. The only alternative meant getting him at once to a house, and that almost certainly meant falling into the hands of Joe Rivers.

The captain considered his chances coolly. Black had said that his wife was to notify the officers to come and arrest Whitney for shooting his daughter. They could not be expected before night at the best, and probably there would be only two of them. Small chance they would have against Rivers's gang. Buck Haines was really his only hope. Buck was capable and would know what to do. The trouble was that the road out of the valley was guarded, but Buck would be a hard man to stop if he wanted to get through. It would be after dark before Buck could reach the cow-camp, and about twelve hours more before the boys could reach Desolation Valley. But when they did come——

Captain Grant picked up Bellamy's inert form and staggered forward. The road made by Bellamy's outfit when going to and coming from work at the dam was easy to follow. Occasionally he had to stop to rest, but he quickly went on again with his burden. He hoped that he would be able to reach Bellamy's shack before the man who had shot Bellamy would return with Rivers and his men. Quickly he learned that that was not to be. While Bellamy's shack was still a quarter of a mile distant half a dozen men rode toward him from Black's, Joe Rivers in the lead. The captain walked on, paying no attention to them.

"So it's Captain Grant who has been impersonating an officer," Rivers sneered as he rode up.

Grant knelt and placed Bellamy on the ground. Then he wiped the perspiration from his face and looked up at Rivers and his gunmen.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "This man here has been shot. Would you or one of your men mind changing off with me a while in carryin' him to his cabin?"

Rivers's lip curled contemptuously.

"You throwed a great bluff last night, Cap, but it don't go today," he said.

"I don't know just what you mean, Joe. I hired this man here to build a reservoir to irrigate this valley, an' when I come up to see how he's gittin' along I find your outfit tryin' to kill him. What am I to think?" the captain demanded.

Rivers looked slightly puzzled.

"If you want to kill time by mending that

hombre's carcass go to it," he finally said. "You won't be crowded for time. My men are holding both entrances into this valley and nobody is going to pass in or out without my consent for some time to come."

"You mean you're going to keep me prisoner here?" the captain asked.

"Exactly—unless I should decide to string you up," Rivers grinned. "First, I'm going down to Ross Fork and get married. I've also got some cattle here that I want to dispose of. By that time I'll know how things stack up. If I find that I can continue my business here by silencing you and whoever is in here with you, you'll be silenced. If the game is played out here, I'll take my wife and go. In that case I'll have no objection to letting you live."

"Thanks," the captain said dryly. "I've got my wind back now an' I'll go on."

ROM his post of vantage in the timber Buck Haines had seen his employer come in sight carrying a wounded man in his arms, and he had seen Rivers and his men ride up and accompany them to Bellamy's shack. The captain had given him orders that if anything of the kind happened, he was to try to get back to the outfit for help.

Buck wasted no time getting started, but wherever he went it seemed that the little valley was full of armed men. He discovered, however, that men were only being changed around and more posted at each entrance. Five men instead of three now guarded the lower gateway to the valley.

After he had succeeded in circling back through the timber until he was again near the road, Buck dismounted and tied his horse while he went forward on foot to view the situation. That he would have to attempt to dash through, shooting with both guns, as he did so, appeared certain, but he wanted all the advantage of knowing where his enemies were if he could get it.

The five outlaws had gathered just where the little gulch dropped into a deep narrow canyon, bordered by sheer walls of rock, barren of timber. A slicker was spread upon the ground and a poker game was in progress. Their position was secure. At the first sign of danger from either direction they had only to jump up and spring behind any of the numerous boulders.

Buck knew that his chances for getting through were slim indeed. On foot he could get within a hundred feet of the men without detection, but on horseback they would see him three hundred yards away. The only thing he could do under the circumstances was to wait, hoping that there would be some change in the situation.

Twenty minutes passed. Suddenly the outlaws sprang to their feet. One of them gathered up the cards; the other jerked the slicker behind a rock. Someone was coming up the canyon from below, and every outlaw was hidden from that direction. Buck began crawling forward.

A gigantic figure of a man, riding awkwardly, suddenly loomed on the road. His beard was long and uncouth, and his trousers had crawled up to his knees. He wore no gun. Buck heaved a sigh of disappointment, but he crawled on.

At the proper moment a gunman stood up and sharply ordered the man on the horse to raise his hands. The man stopped in amazement and his jaw dropped. With a laugh the other outlaws stepped out.

"Hands up!"

The command came crisply from behind the outlaws. Like well drilled soldiers they wheeled as one man, and found themselves confronting two six-shooters loaded with sudden death. For a moment the tableau held. Then the ungainly figure on the horse leaped to the ground. His great fists were swinging like flails, and the outlaws, still under the spell of Buck Haines's guns, went down like tenpins.

Later, standing above the trussed-up bad-men, O'Leary told his story. He had gotten gloriously drunk, but the evening before he had sobered enough to remember his mission. He had inquired in Ross Fork for Captain Grant, and had been directed to one of Grant's men who happened to be in town. The man had left immediately for the cow camp.

"An' he said he'd be along wid de whole gang as quick as he could raise 'em," O'Leary finished. "But Oi hired me a horse an' coom back at wance t' see what Oi could do fer me boss."

"It was lucky yuh did," Buck said with a grin. "Now you an' me will wait here fer the boys, an' there'll be nobody to give the alarm. Gentleman Joe Rivers is in for the surprise of his life."

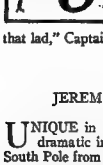
An hour later a solitary horseman, riding at a gallop, came down the valley. Five hats and five backs could be seen in postures that indicated that the men were asleep. The gags and the bonds that tied hands and feet were not so apparent. Gentleman Joe Rivers stopped his horse and ripped out an oath.

"What the hell you fellows mean going to sleep like——"

His hand suddenly darted for his gun but an ominous click warned him to stop.

"Throw 'em up, Rivers; the game's up," Buck drawled, and with a snarl of disappointed rage the rustler chief obeyed.

"An' now, when the rest of our boys arrive, yuh can go back," Buck informed Rivers. "We'll let yuh ride ahead, an' if yuh can pervail on yore sweet-scented crew to hand over their guns as purty as you an' these sleepin' beauties here yuh'll be all right. Otherwise, yuh can figger it out fer yoreself what chance yuh'll stand between two outfits slingin' hot lead at each other."



JOHN BLACK shuffled his feet awkwardly as he gazed at the prone figure of Matt Bellamy.

"Will—will he live?" he queried anxiously.

"Him? why, he's tougher'n whalebone, that lad," Captain Grant remarked. "But," he added seriously, "it'll be a damn long time before he can do any work on that irrigation project. Looks like I'd be out a lot o' money on this, but I reckon I can find a better place to back a project than here anyway."

Black was silent a moment.

"If yuh don't want t' give this up the —the work can go on," he said humbly. "Me an' O'Leary can finish it. We're both good men, an' Matt, you know, is goin' to be my son-in-law."

"Got faith in this country, have you?" the captain demanded.

"Lots of it. And in the people—you cowmen. I didn't understand you or—or Rivers never would have fooled me."

"All right," Captain Grant decided; "go ahead. It's your sort of people who will change conditions so that it will be impossible for men like Rivers to carry on their business. And," he added to himself with prophetic vision, "you will eventually put my class out of business as surely as you put River's. Cowman an' rustler alike must bow—to the plow."

JEREMIAH N. REYNOLDS—PIONEER SOUTH POLE EXPLORER

UNIQUE in the annals of exploring expeditions and vying with that of Columbus in dramatic intensity was the one headed by Jeremiah N. Reynolds, who set out for the South Pole from New York Harbor in October of the year 1829.

Reynolds, who was born in 1800 in Pennsylvania, led an early life that would seem to indicate him to be anything but an adventurer. He was considered a weakling physically. For a time he edited a paper. It was at this time that he became a convert to Captain Symmes' theory. This in short was that the earth is hollow and that there are several spheres each within the other, all of which are open at the poles. The theory was known as the system of "concentric spheres," and at that time was accepted by many people of intelligence.

Reynolds, while lecturing through the country, made the acquaintance of a Dr. Watson, a man of wealth. The two planned a trip to the South Pole to prove their theories. Together, they outfitted a ship and two small tenders, fully manned and outfitted for twelve months.

Their vessel was the *Annawan*, captained by N. V. Palmer. After several weeks sailing they sighted land blockaded by islands of ice. A landing being determined upon, the longboat with a crew of twenty men was launched. The waves were mountain high and a landing was almost impossible, but was finally accomplished on a shore of solid rock. No vegetable growth was visible. They were without provisions and were in a fair way to starve when a sea lion was sighted and shot.

Astronomical observagions established their location as eighty-two degrees south, just eight degrees from the Pole. For ten days they were forced to wait on land until the sea quieted. At last they set out for sea in search of the *Annawan*, which had disappeared. For three days they stayed at sea, then drew up their boat upon a large rock and slept. Reynolds and Watson alone stayed awake. In the night they sighted a light at sea. Awakening the men, they launched the boat and pulled for the light. Soon they were aboard the ship.

At last convinced that they could not force an entrance to the South Pole through the ice, they set sail for home. But their troubles were not over. When they arrived at Valparaiso, Chile, the seamen mutinied, set Reynolds and Watson ashore, and put to sea as a pirate ship. Reynolds remained here until October 1832. He joined the United States frigate *Potomac* at this time in the capacity of private secretary to the commodore and was with it for several years on its long cruise.—H. J. A.

THE SEA FOX

By JAMES K. WATERMAN

Many a British and American naval officer ranged the West African coast in vain trying to trap the wily Sea Fox. Then Commander Gregory took a hand in the game—and so did the Portuguese slaver, Taveira

NOW what in Tophet d'yer suppose that shiver-the-mizzen-lookin' cuss is a-doin' up in that tree this early in the mornin'?" the captain asked himself, fingering his scraggly sun-bleached mustache and goatee thoughtfully. "Looks mighty suspicious to me, somehow."

Cap'n Barnabas N. Pepper, better known as "The Sea Fox" along that 1,500 mile stretch of humid, miasmatic, West African coast between Rio Pongo and Old Calabar, was returning to his ship this Fourth of July morning, after attending an all-night native revel as a guest of the King of Bonny. Suddenly, dazzling, intermittent flashes of light emanating from a lone cotton-tree arrested his attention. This towering tree stood about fifty yards distant from the west bank of the sluggish Bonny River. In the top branches, seventy-five feet from the ground, was a stout platform provided with a seat and thatched with palm-leaves as a protection from sun and rain. This was the slavers' lookout station. Before proceeding down the river the captain of a slaver invariably sent a man up there to see if any cruisers were hovering outside the bar at the mouth of the river.

What had elicited the startled observation from the captain was the startling discovery that the platform was now occupied by an entirely different type of person from that for which it had been erected. Instead of the eagle-eyed, weather-beaten slaver carelessly dressed in dungaree trousers and hickory shirt, a trim figure of a man garbed in the neat duck uniform of an American navy sailor now occupied the lookout. Moreover, this interloper, unaware of the captain's presence, was calmly heliographing, by means of a small pocket-mirror, to some party or parties outside of Cap'n Pepper's field of observation. Needless to say, the Sea Fox was not a little disturbed at these furtive tactics which one of his natural enemies was carrying on under, or rather over, his very nose.

Accordingly Cap'n Pepper planted his short, square figure firmly, elevated his stubby, freckled nose high in the air and, jerking out a pocket pistol, drew a bead on the signaler.

"Come down outa that, you!" he bellowed. "Come down quick before ye come down head first!"

The man-of-war's man looked down, grinned, and, pocketing the mirror, swung onto the Jacob's-ladder, his tall, well-knit form swaying from side to side as he descended with an ease betokening long familiarity with ladders of that pattern slung over a ship's side. He landed lightly on the ground before the captain, the arched nostrils of his large aquiline nose lifting slightly in a smile; his cool, gray eyes regarding the other's snapping black ones unperturbedly.

"Captain Pepper, I presume," he remarked blithely. "I must say you're an

early riser, sir, especially on a holiday. This is the glorious Fourth, you know."

The Sea Fox glowered, taking in at a glance the stranger's demeanor, unmistakably that of an officer and a gentleman.

"'Bout thirty years old, I'd say, an' nothin' less than a leftenant I'll bet my hat," was the captain's mental appraisment. Aloud he barked: "T'hell with that palaver. What ye doin' up there with that lookin'-glass is what I wanta know." He menaced with the pistol.

"Why, I don't mind telling you, Captain," returned the other sweetly. "I was communicating with the United States Brig-of-war *Porpoise*. She's hove-to outside the bar."

"The *Porpoise!*" repeated Cap'n Pepper with a grimace of dismay. "Confound that Commodore Gregory to hell. As soon's I arrived on the coast this voyage I was warned to keep a weather eye liftin' for him. Can't be possible he's here this quick. I heard only yesterday that he was a hundred an' eighty miles to the nor'west of here; off Benin or nigh to it."

"Your scouts evidently aren't as reliable as ours, Captain. The *Porpoise* is here and two more of Commodore Gregory's squadron, the *Bainbridge* and the *Perry*, are cruising close at hand in the Bight of Biafra."

The manner in which the navy man imparted this information showed that he was not at all displeased that they had finally cornered the Sea Fox, whose strategic artifices, combined with the swift-sailing qualities of his brigantine, the *Wild Pigeon*, had long been the despair of the American and English cruisers.

"Close at hand, eh? Well, be damned to 'em. It's the *Porpoise* I'm considerin' now. What was you a-tellin' 'em with that glass, I'd like to know?"

"I was telling them that there was a mighty fine slaving brigantine lying concealed in that thick grove of mangroves and kanana trees, by the river bank there. I had some difficulty in making her out, too. She was so cleverly disguised with those branches of trees lashed to her trucks and upper spars."

"And you never would have detected her either," declared Cap'n Pepper with a flash of pride at his handiwork, "if some of them sore-head Fantees hadn't told ye where to look." He paused and deftly patted the other's clothing in a search for weapons.

"I had a pistol," the navy man stated, "but I lost it somehow coming through the brush before daylight this morning."

"You did, eh," grunted the captain. "Well, you can see plain enough I ain't lost mine an' the *Porpoise* is a-goin' to be an officer short if you don't skip aloft there right now an' signal your ship that you mistook some of them trees for the masts of my vessel. Them seaman's togs you're wearin' don't fool a bit. Up ye go!"

The navy man shook his head.

"It's positively no use for me to do that, Captain," he stated calmly, "because the commodore knows beyond the question of a doubt that the *Wild Pigeon* is lying here with two hundred and five slaves aboard. I was merely detailed to signal the course for our boats to take. There are three boats now just behind that curve in the river. They carry forty-five men and each boat mounts a four-pound swivel. You can see they got you this time, Captain. You——"

The Sea Fox waited to hear no more. He wheeled and was off on the run for his ship, with the navy man close at his heels. "It's no use, Captain. Be sensible. Game's up," the latter panted.

Cap'n Pepper's feet chugged along the sedgy shore of the river until he came to the bamboo landing to which his beautiful craft was made fast. He was bounding along this landing when his straining eyes caught sight of the three boats, crammed with man-of-war's men, pulling around a turn in the bank and within easy hailing distance of his ship. He cursed between his teeth as he thought of losing the two hundred and five slaves now below her deck. They were the pick of the Aro nation, the finest specimens of black humanity he had ever seen in his twenty years of slaving. Among them were fifty-three fine, strapping girls, anywhere from seventeen to twenty years old, that he had procured after much hazardous labor from the priest of the "Long Juju" (sacred grove) at Aro-Chuku. These comely girls would fetch from five to eight hundred dollars a piece as maids for some of the stately mansions of Virginia.

What counted even more with the Sea Fox, as with every true sailor, was the idea of losing his splendid brigantine. Hers was the swiftest keel that ever parted the waters of the Gulf of Guinea, as many a wrathful man-of-war officer to whom she had flaunted a saucy stern, flying westward, could testify. Never, the captain felt, would he be able to get her like again.

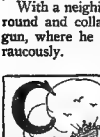
The *Porpoise's* boats would have reached

the *Wild Pigeon* at about the same time as her captain but for a startling and totally unexpected interruption. Suddenly a wild-eyed, red-shirted son of the State of Delaware boiled up through the after companion-scuttle, a lighted match flaring like a torch in his hand. This effervescent mariner was the chief officer, Mr. Tom Dollar and, being nearly as blind as an owl with drink, he saw nothing of the approaching boats.

Bounding to the long twelve-pounder at the stern, he slapped the match to the touch-hole. Followed a roar that rent the quiet air and set the monkeys to jabbering for miles along the river banks; a double-headed shot raked the bank of port oar-blades of the head boat, cutting them as cleanly as a knife and upsetting some of the oarsmen.

"Hoo-roo—hoo-roo fur the Fourth o' July!" screeched Tom Dollar.

With a neighing laugh, he spun half-way round and collapsed at the breech of the gun, where he immediately began snoring raucously.



CAP'N PEPPER ripped out an oath of vexation.

"Ain't that just plumb hell!" he growled to the navy man. "If that crazy Tom Dollar has killed any of your party it means a Federal prison for life, that is if we ain't hanged. What's your name, mister?"

"Candage," answered the other. "Luke Candage."

"Well, Mr. Candage, I may want ye for a witness one of these days. You must have seen that my mate was drunk an' didn't know what he was doin'. I'll see there's no more o' that business goin' on."

He rushed up the gangway and down into the cabin, expecting to find a hilarious drinking party there. Much to his surprise the cabin was deserted. His roving eyes finally lighted on a white sheet of paper scrawled over with writing and pinned to the table with the thin-bladed knife he used to cut up tobacco. It was written in Spanish, a language the captain could read and write fluently, but he had no time to read it now; the tramp of feet sounded on the companion-way and he had barely shoved the note into his pocket when Mr. Candage came in with the officer in charge of the boarding party.

"Good morning, Captain," greeted the officer, who wore the epaulets of a lieutenant. "Mr. Candage here has explained that your twelve-pounder was fired just now merely to commemorate the Fourth and not with any designs against us. Your mate was a little reckless but as there's nobody hurt we'll say no more about it. I want to take a look around your vessel, Captain, just to satisfy myself as to her real character."

Cap'n Pepper, knowing the futility of protesting against this search of his vessel, smiled and handed over his keys.

"Go as far as you like, gentlemen," he told them and, picking his pipe from the table, filled and lighted it unconcernedly.

From his coolness one would never suspect that the fifty-three girls were quartered in the long rooms on each side of the cabin.

In the next five minutes the lieutenant discovered, much to his astonishment and, needless to say, Cap'n Pepper's, that these rooms were now destitute of anything in the shape of a human being. The girls had vanished.

A search of the hold, clean, roomy, well-lighted by glass cones set into the deck and ventilated by wind-sails in the hatches, also proved fruitless. The one hundred and fifty-two male slaves quartered there were now missing, as if they had dissolved in thin air.

The *Wild Pigeon* was a slaver *de luxe*. She laid no slave-decks, nor did she carry leg-irons, "middle-chains," or any other device for manacling slaves.

After an examination of the ship's papers, which were strictly in form, the lieutenant knew that he had no grounds for holding the vessel. He had had his trouble for nothing.

"Well, I am astonished, most damnably astonished," he declared with a look of mingled chagrin and admiration at Cap'n Pepper. "We know positively that you had over two hundred slaves aboard here at six o'clock last night and we would have been here long before this if the bar hadn't been so rough before the tide turned. What you've done with the slaves I don't know, but I can see that your nickname is most appropriate. You have all the attributes of old Reynard, but don't forget, Captain, we'll be waiting off the bar for you to come out. We haven't given up hope of getting you by any means. Good day."

He went over the rail, leaving Cap'n Pepper standing there fingering his goatee in a bewildered manner. In all truth, he was as much at a loss as the lieutenant to

account for the disappearance of his slaves, but he had a feeling that the note which all along had been burning a hole in his pocket, so to speak, would shed some light on the mystery. As soon as the naval contingent was well on its way down the river he drew back under the awning and in a twinkling his eyes were flaming over the written sheet. It ran:

To the Sea Fox:

I have had much trouble in filling up my ship with a slave-cargo and so, finding a goodly number aboard of your vessel, I took great pleasure in helping mysolf to them. How I did it is for you to find out. But by the time you get clear of the Porpoise *I shall have completed loading at Forcados River and be bound home.*

Captain Rosenda Taveira,
Schooner Toreador.

P. S. My knife is stuck in your mainmast.
R. T.

THE SEA FOX, his heavy jaw protruding, each stubbly hair of his mustache and goatee bristling with rage, leaped to the mainmast and jerked out the leather-hafted, narrow-bladed knife sticking there. According to slaving custom a knife planted in the mainmast of a rival conveyed an unmentionable insult, an insult which it was understood must be wiped out in no other way than by sheathing the blade in the owner's heart. Cap'n Pepper looked at the knife a long moment and then threw it into the river. He rarely worked along established lines. He would have revenge on Taveira in his own way; and he knew he was going to have his work cut out for him before he squared accounts with this scourge of the slave coast.

"Panyerer" (Kidnapper) Taveira feared neither God, man, nor the devil. He snapped his fingers at the cruisers and, in the slavers' resorts along the Mole in Havana, boasted with great gusto of how, when once he was pursued by a man-of-war and capture seemed imminent he had shackled the sixty slaves he had aboard at the time to heavy chains and grouped them on the weather side of the after-house. Then suddenly jibing his mainsail, the heavy boom had knocked them kicking into the sea, thus removing all evidence from the eyes of the baffled searching party that had boarded him an hour later.

This hunch-backed, horse-faced, one-eyed Portuguese monster swore that he would never be taken alive. At all times there was a fuse leading from a drawer in the desk at the head of his berth down to the powder-magazine of his schooner.

"Me, my niggers, and those navy dogs will all go to hell at the same time the moment I see a boarding-party routing my crew," he bragged in his drinking bouts, his black, bushy brows lifting in a ferocious leer.

Cap'n Pepper fetched a deep sigh at the thought of all his splendid black people now crammed, with not so much room as a man in his coffin, between the sweltering, loathsome decks of the *Toreador*, entirely at the mercy of this inhuman captain.

True, Taveira, by stealing his slaves, had saved the Sea Fox from having his vessel and cargo confiscated and relieved him of the necessity of forfeiting three thousand dollars bail, the customary amount fixed by the United States Judge in such cases. But rather a hundred times would he have undergone that ordeal than to have had that diabolical Taveira take the wind out of his sails in such a manner. This feeling was not diminished when presently the captain discovered that Taveira had not only taken his slaves but had also carried off his bosun, Robin Hood, a free-born negro from Massachusetts and without his equal as a seaman.

"Come, get into gear here!" growled Cap'n Pepper, a few minutes later, shaking Tom Dollar by the collar. "Every man-jack forrad is stretched out like a dead herrin'. Just a-reekin' of rum an' laudanum they be, an' it looks like ye got plenty of the same dose. Wake up an' tell me what that cussed Portygee done to ye all."

The mate partly opened one eye.

"Hoo-roo—for Fourth—J'ly!" he muttered feebly, and, slowly closing the eye, began snoring again.

"Well, the Fourth prompted ye to do one good trick anyway," grumbled the captain, surveying the disheveled figure of his mate disgustedly. "By firing that gun ye stopped the lieutenant long enough for me to get Taveira's note outa the way before he clapped eyes on it. 'Twould interfere with my plans if the *Porpoise* knew where my slaves had gone to."

Going to the galley, the captain built a fire and made a large kettle of strong black coffee. Then he dumped a can of mustard into a two-quart pitcher of warm water and was stirring it with an iron

spoon when four of the crew who had spent the night ashore somewhere, came over the rail.

These men Cap'n Pepper at once converted into nurses. With loud guffaws they began dosing their shipmates with the stinging emetic. The mustard and coffee worked wonders and in the course of an hour the mate and crew had come to life and were wabbling about the decks.

Their rather incoherent version of the affair finally simmered down to the fact that the Mandingo cook, whom the captain had shipped that week before in Old Calabar, was merely a tool of Taveira's. It was the cook who had brought four bottles of rum to the foremost hands to celebrate the night before the Fourth. The patriotic Tom Dollar had fallen for the same bait.

A search of the cook's bunk showed that he had gone with his master and taken all his belongings.

Cap'n Pepper could visualize quite easily just how Taveira had pulled the trick. The cook must have sent word to the Portuguese that Cap'n Pepper would be absent from his vessel that night; he himself had told the cook that he was going to the king's Chop-day celebration. The fact that there was a United States cruiser off the mouth of the river had proved no deterant to the piratical slaver.

Seven miles up the Bonny River was a creek eight miles long which emptied into the Andoni River. The mouths of the rivers were fourteen miles apart and, if the existence of the creek was known to the *Porpoise*, which was doubtful, it was not considered navigable for any slave craft.

All had been plain sailing for Taveira. He had simply anchored his light-draft schooner at the Andoni end of the creek and removed the *Wild Pigeon's* slaves with his boats.

"THERE ain't no two ways 'bout it, Cap'n. That yaller-belly has hooked us sunthin' scand'lous," observed Tom Dollar, rubbing his aching head dejectedly. "One thing is certain: he ain't going to no Forcados River like he says in the note. He's just settin' ye a false course case ye go to follerin' him. He'll likely go the other way; p'raps as far south as Ambriz an' finish loadin'. What ye goin' to do now, Cap'n?"

"Do? Why I'm a-goin' to get my niggers back if I have to follow the *Toreador* clear to Cuby. I'd be the laffin' stock of the coast if Taveira gets away with 'em. It's my opinion that he's got his load and is off on the 'Middle Passage' right now. If he was intendin' to remain longer on the coast it ain't likely he'd a-bothered us. Well, we'll go after him. We got to get busy. My doctor book says in a case o' laudanum pizenin' to give 'em emetics an' strong coffee an' forced, prolonged, an' active exercise. I've given ye the first two an' now we'll have the rest. This ship has got to be ready for haulin' through the creek by nightfall. So turn all hands to an' get everythin' shipshape an' Bristol fashion."

A little after dark the tired, sweaty crew, by means of running-lines made fast to trees along the banks, began warping their ship through the creek connecting the two rivers. It was man-killing labor, for part of the way they literally had to force her sharp keel through the slimy mud of the creek bottom. The air in that black, narrow ribbon of water, between dense growth of mangroves and tropical plants of immense size, was as dead and nearly as hot as the inside of a furnace.

The monkeys scolded and the jump-fish croaked at this unusual disturbance of their habitat. Now and then the long yard-arms of the vessel would rip through some rank foliage and scatter leaves on the deck, many of them quite large enough to have made an overcoat. There was no moon, but the great stars blazed out like electric lights set in a vast velvet canopy, giving light enough for sailors to work.

By 4:30 in the morning they were through the creek. After all hands had "spliced the main brace" with a double portion of grog, sail was made and, with a heavy squall commingled with rain and lightning sweeping over her stern, the *Wild Pigeon* darted down the Andoni River nearly as fast as the beautiful bird whose name she bore.

At dawn they crossed the bar and stood out into the Bight, steering a southerly course to get well clear of the land and to avoid the *Porpoise*, which at that moment was lying off the Bonny River, well within the hundred-fathom curve her officers congratulating themselves on having the wary Sea Fox tightly bottled up.

"By crickety! This is one time we've wiped Commodore Gregory's eye," chuckled Cap'n Pepper to his mate as they stood

watching, the sun shoot above the inshore mist. "We've fooled him completely."

"I believe you have. I'm quite sure the commodore never anticipated this," interrupted a laughing voice.

Wheeling, the slavers beheld, in the companion-scuttle, the smiling face of Mr. Candage.

"Where the hell did ye come from?" the Sea Fox blurted out, striding toward him with mouth agape.

Mr. Candage emerged from the companion and seated himself coolly on the edge of the skylight as if his being there was the most natural thing in the world, his smile deepening as if well pleased with himself and all around him. This smile was so irresistibly contagious that Cap'n Pepper's stern features relaxed visibly, while Tom Dollar showed his tobacco-stained teeth in a wide grin.

"It's rather cramped quarters down in your storeroom," observed the newcomer, "so I came on deck to stretch my legs a bit."

Briefly he told them that he had been detailed to keep an eye on the *Wild Pigeon* as it was suspected that her slaves had merely been removed temporarily to one of the barracoons near Bonny. When he had seen the slaver about to haul through the creek he had slipped alongside in a canoe and, under cover of darkness, had gained the storeroom without being observed.

"Looks as though my zeal has made me overshoot the mark," he laughed. "I can assure you, Captain, that I had no intention of going to sea with you."

"Yes, seems like ye got yourself in quite a mess, Mr. Candage," replied the Sea Fox. "The simplest way for us to get ye outa it would be to knock ye on the head right now an' throw ye over the side. D'yer know that?"

"Perfectly well, Captain. But I also know you'd never do it. You're not that kind. You don't kill in cold blood. You have the reputation among us navy men of being the most humane slaver in these seas."

"That might all be," returned the Sea Fox. "Them guns we carry ain't for fightin' you folks"—he smiled grimly—"but to protect us from our own kind. There may be some sorta honor among thieves, but there ain't none with slavers—the Portygee kind anyway. Now tell me, Mr. Candage, what was ye aboard the *Porpoise*?"

"I—I held the rank of lieutenant, Captain."

"H-m, I thought so. Well, I don't want to be too strict with ye, an' I'll put you on parole if you'll give me your word that ye won't do nothin' to the detriment of my ship or crew while you're aboard here. You can see 'twould be mighty inconvenient for us if ye should start cuttin' the braces or halliards when some of your cruisers was a-chasin' us."

"Very well," Mr. Candage decided, after a moment's thought. "I give you my word that I'll do nothing to endanger your ship or crew while I'm aboard here. And I also promise that when you're my prisoner I'll extend to you a similar courtesy."

"I b'lieve you. But I ain't anxious to test your hospital'ty just now, Leftenant," chuckled Cap'n Pepper, pleased to find the navy man such a likeable chap. "Now just make yourself at home. If I ain't forgot my full bag o' tricks I reckon before long you'll see more real, hell-for-leather excitement with this here craft in one hour than ye would on the *Porpoise* in a month o' Sundays."

HE *Wild Pigeon* was steering the course of a slaver bound to Cuba, and thirty-six hours from the time she crossed the bar she sighted on the horizon, square in the middle of the setting sun, the tops'ls of a schooner.

"Frazzle me for a deck-swab if I don't b'lieve that's the *Toreador*," exclaimed Tom Dollar. "Ye figgered right, Cap'n, what the Portygee 'ud do. That must be her. She's run into a calm streak an' we've overhauled her."

"It's her all right," confirmed Cap'n Pepper, coming on the poop after a look aloft, his eyes glinting. "I'll likely be alongside of her by crack o' dawn tomorrow."

To his infinite disgust, shortly after midnight the wind died out. The long Gulf swells, sweeping with oily smoothness against the low black sides of the brigantine, kept lifting her and then settling her down into an inky hollow, which motion produced a thundering slat from her enormous fore and aft mainsail and necessitated lowering the sail.

Candage had gone below in the latter part of the first watch but, finding it impossible to sleep on account of the stifling heat in the cabin, he finally sprang in dis-

gust from his bunk and joined the captain on the poop. A heavy mist was creeping across the water from inshore; even at that distance it bore the dank, sickly smell of rank vegetation, and fetid fruit. Huge cumulus clouds were also coming up from the westward to meet it, and soon every star was blotted out and the ship was shrouded in blackness.

It was while they were waiting for a breeze that Cap'n Pepper deemed the time opportune for partially enlightening the navy man concerning the object of this cruise.

"Listen!" he broke off suddenly, laying his hand on the navy man's arm. "Do you hear anythin'?"

"I heard a noise like the slattin' o' sails," announced Tom Dollar, who had nearly run over them on his way to the binnacle. "Thar' 'tis again. Wear me under bare poles if that ain't a schooner's rags a-slattin' somewhere off'n our port beam."

"It's the Portygee!" whispered the Sea Fox jubilantly. "Pass the word along to the men, Mr. Dollar, not to show no kind of a light an' not to make no noise. We'll likely get a crack at that feller in the mornin'. There's a four-knot current sweepin' from Cape Palmas east'ard an' both vessels are in it.

"We'll have wind and plenty of it before the regular land breeze sets in," declared Candage, as large drops of rain began spattering the deck. "A squall will follow this rain. I hope it won't separate us from the schooner. I wouldn't miss this fight, Captain, for a farm down East."

Conversation was cut short by a terrific downpour of rain, during which they sheltered themselves under the drooping folds of the mainsail. Then came a fierce squall which lasted not more than five minutes, subsiding into a gentle westerly.

"I hope the wind don't hold in this quarter," grumbled Cap'n Pepper, slatting the water from his sou'wester. "If it does it means chasing the *Toreador* on a wind, an' I've an idea she's faster on that point than the *Wild Pigeon*."

To his delight, in a few minutes the wind hauled to the southward. All plain sail was made and the ship put on a course half a point to windward of the one Cap'n Pepper knew the *Toreador* must take to get clear of the stiff current. The *Wild Pigeon* now had the wind a point abaft the starboard beam, and there was not a vessel on the coast could touch her when she was running free.

Not for nothing had Cap'n Pepper been termed the Sea Fox; the breaking dawn disclosed the Portuguese craft a point on the lee bow and about two miles distant. Whereupon the arms chest was at once looted of its weapons—carbines, pistols, and cutlasses. Ammunition was put in readiness, the gun sponged and reloaded, matches placed handy, and the decks sanded to keep them from becoming slippery with blood.

Mr. Candage looked on these preparations with an approving eye. It was plainly evident that the Sea Fox was no amateur at this mode of fighting.

Inshore about three miles distant, like a great gray wall, was the fog. This fog was dangerous in that anything might come out of it; perhaps that slavers' dread, a cruiser.

THE great snowy sails of the schooner *Torcador*, flashed in the bright sunlight. The long black hull with its graceful streamlines glided through the water with just a touch of foamy ripple at her bows, making all of nine knots in that moderate breeze.

The Sea Fox paced the poop of his vessel with Candage and Tom Dollar, every now and then taking the bearings of the chase from the compass, and looking up speculatively at her own towering spars that were carrying every rag she had on her.

"We're overhaulin' him slowly," he remarked after another squint into the binnacle. "We'll soon see whether he intends to run or show his teeth. Look at that, will ye! Don't that just beat hell!" he exclaimed a moment later as the schooner suddenly flattened in her sheets and went reaching along close-hauled on the starboard tack. "He knows that I can't head as close to the wind as him but he prob'ly figgers that I'll try to follow him just the same. He's got another think a-comin'. He can't hold long on that course or he'll be back again in the current. Meanwhile I'll try a trick or two myself."

The lee stuns'ls were taken in and Cap'n Pepper braced up the yards and hauled his wind so that it was only a point free. He held this course for a half-hour, by which time the *Toreador* was a mile on his weather beam. Then he took in the remaining stuns'ls, braced sharp up, got good headway on her and went about.

"I'll keep tackin' till I either drive him

back to the coast or force him to fight," he explained. "Ah! Taveira's got it through his thick head at last what I'm up to. Here he comes."

The *Toreador* was sweeping round in a graceful curve and in another minute was heading directly for the *Wild Pigeon*. At the same time the Portuguese colors flew to her main truck with the American flag upside down underneath. No greater insult was ever given by one captain to another, signifying as it did that the flag underneath was fit only for a door-mat.

The navy ma'n's eyes flashed.

"What wouldn't I give to be able to fire a broadside from the *Porpoise* into him now," he grated. His eyes rested longingly on the twelve-pounder on the poop. "When he gets within range, Captain, do let me have a shot at him with that," he entreated.

The captain nodded assent and Candage, with the aid of some of the husky crew, swung the 2,300-pound gun into position.

When Candage, who knew to a hair the range of the gun he was handling, judged the schooner was close enough he carefully sighted the gun and then stepped back as Tom Dollar kissed the touch-hole with a lighted match. The big gun belched and thundered and when the smoke cleared away the crew burst into a rousing cheer. The fore topmast of the schooner was shot clean away and was now dangling over the port fore chains.

Still the *Toreador* held her course, while her fore rigging became suddenly alive with men clearing the tangled mess and cutting the wreckage adrift. The falling topmast must have put her Long Tom out of commission, for she made no attempt to use it and probably did not care to lose her advantageous position by yawing to fire a broadside.

"Stand by your sheets and braces, men," commanded the Sea Fox, watching the approaching schooner coolly; "an' work lively when ye get the word."

When the two vessels were about a cable's length apart, the wheel of the *Wild Pigeon* was jammed hard down and she went in stays. As she spun on the other tack the positions of the ships were reversed. The speed of the schooner carried her on just right for the brigantine to range by her stern, and Tom Dollar improved the opportunity by raking her decks and doing terrible execution with the pivot-gun forward, double-shotted with grape. The next moment the *Wild Pigeon* was rounding to under the schooner's counter and the grappling-irons flew and held.

"Never in my life did I see prettier work," exulted Candage. "It couldn't have been done better in the navy."

"Go after 'em, men!" shouted Cap'n Pepper, and his crew, armed with cutlass and pistol, swarmed over the rail.

The Sea Fox with Candage and Tom Dollar bounded on her poop rail and from there to her deck. The latter had hardly felt the planks under his feet before he had discharged his pistol into the face of the schooner's mate and thus one of her officers was accounted for in a twinkling.

A swarthy, squat, gorilla-looking man with one eye and an enormous lump on his back came bounding like an ape across the top of the house, bellowing in Portuguese for his men to butcher and give no quarter. It was Taveira. He made a swipe, a slashing cut with his heavy cutlass at Cap'n Pepper, which the latter avoided by leaping back nimbly. Before the infuriated Portuguese could renew the attack Candage brought his cutlass down on Taveira's misshapen skull; he dropped like a poled ox.

"Why didn't you leave him to me?" growled the Sea Fox. "He was my meat by right."

"They all look alike to me," yelled back Candage, his eyes glowing like hot steel with the lust of battle.

Even with their leaders gone the crew of the *Toreador* continued fighting with all the brutal ferocity of wild beasts defending their lair. But, just as the issue of the battle seemed trembling in the balance, suddenly the gratings on the main hatch burst upward and a gigantic negro Robin Hood, the *Wild Pigeon's* bosun—with twenty savage Gold Coast natives that he had liberated, streamed over the hatch-coamings. They all wielded five-foot lengths of firewood of tough African oak and at once, with horrible yells, they started mowing a swathe through the Portuguese.

This was more than the battered remainder of the schooner's crew had bargained for, and after a last feeble stand they were all driven below into the fo'c's'le and the scuttle fastened over them. The fight had lasted just twenty-seven minutes, during which time eighteen of the Portuguese and eleven of the boarders had been killed.

"Hoo-roo for Tippecanoe an' Tyler too," yelled Tom Dollar, when he saw the battle was won. "Hoo-roo ag'in."

"Good enough, Mr. Dollar," conceded Cap'n Pepper, tearing off a piece of his shirt sleeve and holding it to a bleeding cut on his left eyebrow, "but we'll celebrate when we get clear of this mess. Clear the decks so's ye can work, an' then get the slaves aboard the *Wild Pigeon* as quick's ye can. We can't tell what minute a cruiser might come nosin' round."

"Hold on there, Captain Pepper," broke in Candage. "You seem to forget that I'm a representative of the United States Government and as such is my duty to declare the *Toreador* and her cargo a lawful prize of that country. I will see, however, that the part you've all taken in capturing her will be fully reported to the Secretary of the Navy. Now I'll——"

"Belay that palaver, Mr. Candage," snapped the Sea Fox, who was in no mood to brook interference at this critical moment. "I'll turn the schooner over to ye just as soon's I can. I know you'd be pained at the sight of what I'm a-gotn' to do, so I'll put ye in the dog-house* for a little while. I'll let ye out the minnit we're through our business an' then ye can have your hooker. Robin Hood, show this gentleman to the dog-house."

"Yes sah," grinned the giant bosun. "Jus' come this way ef yah please, sah."

Candage well knew the futility of protesting further. "Pity you can't keep a good clearance when you have it, Captain," he concluded. "Once you put slaves aboard of your vessel I shall have to condemn her also."

Cap'n Pepper chuckled and turned away. The navy man was put into the dog-house, the sliding door shut and securely fastened with a belaying pin wedged in the back of it.

THE transfer of the slaves took some little time. But finally, when the Sea Fox had his original two hundred and five slaves and sixty more besides, the warning cry of the lookout stationed at the masthead rang out.

"Sail—ho. Dead on the weather beam."

As the Sea Fox had more than half feared, a cruiser flying the American colors at her peak had emerged from the fog and was now bearing down on them under a press of canvas. She was the brig-of-war *Perry*, now about a mile distant.

Instantly Cap'n Pepper withdrew his crew from the schooner, grappling-ropes were cut, and slowly the vessels began drifting apart as the *Wild Pigeon* filled her head sails.

There was perhaps thirty-feet separating them when Tom Dollar uttered a startled oath and drew the captain's attention to the schooner's poop. Taveira, who had been forgotten in the heat of battle and left for dead, was now seen slowly getting on his feet. He clambered painfully onto the main sheerpole, took one look at the approaching war vessel and, like a monstrous crab, scuttled below into the cabin.

"He's a-goin' to blow the schooner up, I do b'lieve!" gasped Tom Dollar. "Ye know he swears no cruser'll take him alive. Damnation! I thought that hellion was outa the reck'nin' for good. I——" he broke off suddenly while his tanned features assumed an ashy-gray color. "By God!" he jerked out. "I left that poor officer cooped up in the dog-house. An' —an' I promised to let him out when I was through. I clean forgot him."

The next moment there was a splash in the water and the Sea Fox was tearing through the sea in the direction of the schooner. He was not more than two minutes reaching her chains. Climbing up, he swung onto her deck and made for the dog-house door. Kicking out the belaying pin, he slid the door back.

"Jump overboard quick'n hell before you're blowed up!" he yelled to Candage and dashed for the cabin.

At the foot of the companionway his ear-drums vibrated from the sudden report of a pistol fired in close quarters.

"Someone has shot himself," said the voice of Candage at his elbow.

Cap'n Pepper gave a snarl of dispair.

"You fool, why didn't ye save yourself!" he threw over his shoulder as he ran into the captain's room.

Taveira lay sprawled on the carpet-rug, the smoking pistol gripped tightly in his stiffening fingers. The *sput-sput* of a burning fuse could be plainly heard. Lifting the top of the desk, they saw a round hole in one corner smudged with smoke.

"It's already in the hold!" flashed Cap'n Pepper. "Jump over the side quick, you. There ain't no use both of us gettin' killed."

Quickly he rolled the body away and tossed up the rug, disclosing a small hatch. A second sufficed to throw this aside and Cap'n Pepper was squeezing down through the square aperture. In the darkness of

*Officers quarters on deck when the cabin is given over to female slaves.—J. H. W.

the hold he made out the red end of the fuse sputtering over the chines of a cask. Sweating and swearing, the Sea Fox worked his way to it and gave a jerk; it came away in his hands to the length of three fathoms.

He rubbed it out against the bilge of a cask and, coming back to the hatch, handed it up to Candage, who was still standing waiting.

"You've saved those two hundred or more slaves still remaining in the hold," declared the naval officer as the Sea Fox climbed out of the hatchway and stood for a moment dashing the sweat from his eyes. "You may be a slaver and all that, but, by gad, I'm proud to know you." He seized the captain's hand and shook it heartily.

"I ain't got no time to palaver now," blurted Cap'n Pepper, making like a flash for the deck.

Here he cast a hasty glance about and saw that the brig-of-war was within pistol shot.

"The game is up, Captain," announced Candage. "Wish it was someone else I had to take though. Makes it bad you having those slaves aboard, but I'll do all I can for you. You can trust me. I'm Commodore Gregory, you know."

THE next moment it was plainly apparent that the Sea Fox had no intention of trusting the commodore or any one else wearing a naval uniform. Placing a hand on the rail, he vaulted overboard. Four minutes later his dripping figure could be discerned standing on the poop of his vessel.

Meanwhile the commodore had leaped into the main rigging and with a handkerchief was wigwagging a message to the *Perry*. Whereupon she immediately manœuvered so as to glide in between the schooner and the brigantine. The latter was fairly trapped. The breeze had stiffened but if the Sea Fox had attempted to beat to windward he undoubtedly would have had his masts shot away for his trouble.

"Ain't it just plumb hell?" inquired Tom Dollar of nobody in particular. "All this here work for nothin'. It won't be bail for me this time nuther. I skipped it twice already. Waal, we had a tarnation fine scrap an' no mistake, so hoo-roo an' be damned to 'em."

"Shut up, you!" snapped the Sea Fox. "So long's we got planks under our feet we got a chance an' I'm a-goin' to take it. That cruiser won't try to hull us for fear of killing the slaves. He'll try for our masts an' riggin'. Stand by your braces, Mr. Dollar, ready to square in lively. Leave one man here at the main sheet. It's goin' to be some squeak, for I ain't got room to clear the *Perry*, but as long's we can swing a rope-yarn we'll keep a-goin'."

He then hauled down his flag in token of surrender and took the wheel. Spinning it hard up, he kept off and nodded his head to Tom Dollar. The fore yards swung quietly. The very boldness of the Sea Fox's plan made for its success. Never, against such overwhelming odds, did the *Perry's* officers dream of his attempting to escape. They naturally supposed that the Sea Fox was about to heave-to close to them. To their unbounded astonishment and before they had realized what he was up to, he had swung by their stern so closely that he snapped off the *Perry's* spanker boom at the sheet-band like a pipe-stem.

Then, hauling his wind, he put the schooner between his vessel and the cruiser and, thus having rendered her guns unavailable, the Sea Fox piled the stuns'ls onto the *Wild Pigeon* and went skimming to the westward like a freed bird. Gone.

Commodore Gregory grinned and shouted an order to the *Perry's* officers. With wide eyes they were lining her poop-rail within thirty feet of where he stood on the schooner. In another moment the brisk breeze bore to the ears of the fleeing brigantine's crew the sounds of three rousing cheers from at least eighty lusty throats.

"D'yer hear that now, Mr. Dollar?" exclaimed Cap'n Pepper. "They're cheerin' the commodore for capturin' the *Toreador*. Good luck to him, an' he's welcome to what we done toward it. He's a most likeable cuss an' a first-class fightin' man. Ye seen that today, an', as sure's your name's Tom Dollar, if he hadn't been the gentleman he is we'd both be prisoners now aboard the *Perry*.

"He could 'a' got me by simply puttin' on that hatch just before I handed him the fuse. I could see in his eyes that he'd thought about that same thing, but he was too square to do it. I tell ye, Tom Dollar, that when Uncle Sam begins sendin' out them kinda men to the coast it's about time the Sea Fox was a-lookin' for his hole."

JACK SLADE, MAN-KILLER

By ARTHUR CHAPMAN

Death—ruthless, merciless, sweeping death—was Jack Slade's remedy for outlawry and thieving. With it he wrote his name in blood along the Western frontier, but saved the Overland Stage Line from destruction

JACK SLADE, from a convenient arroyo, surveyed the camp of horse rustlers which he had approached with all the stealth of an Indian scout.

There were five men in camp. Four of of them were moving about, in the course of preparing a hasty meal. The fifth was standing guard over a group of horses. Slade's eyes gave forth a gleam of satisfaction as he saw the brand of the Overland Stage Company on the animals.

"Stick 'em up!" Slade's voice rang out, an instant later.

The men, caught by surprise, raised their hands. Slade approached, his grim, dark face, with its high cheek-bones, seeming almost demoniacal behind his two leveled revolvers.

"You hombres have been rustling stock from this stage line long enough," said Slade. "I'll let one of you live, to tell the rest of the gang what's happened. The rest of you die right here."

Then Slade opened fire, with marvelous rapidity and accuracy.

Two of the men tried to draw, but were shot dead before their weapons had left their holsters. Two others fell, mortally wounded. The fifth, the man guarding the horses, begged for mercy.

"There's going to be no mercy along this division," said Slade, firing with deliberation and shattering the right arm of the man, who fell squirming to the ground. "I'll help you back on your horse, and you just ride off, pardner, and spread the news that Jack Slade is division superintendent from South Pass to Julesburg, and that white men or Injuns are as good as dead if they lay a finger on company livestock from now on."

Such was Jack Slade's first day as division superintendent of six hundred miles of the Overland Stage line, which had been so harassed by bandits and Indians in Wyoming and Colorado that it looked as if the trans-continental line of travel was definitely broken.

Joseph A. Slade, or "Jack" as the West knew him, had been picked as the one man to clear up the situation on this division, and he started out to kill. In a short time he was known all along the Western frontier as the greatest gun-fighter and the most ruthless and cruel killer among all those whose names have been written in blood in Far Western history.

When Mark Twain turned westward and stopped at a station in Slade's division, Slade had a record of twenty-six notches on his gun handle, every notch signifying a human life. The humorist in "Roughing It" characteristically describes his perturbation at finding himself seated at the

table with Slade. This perturbation was increased when he discovered that coffee enough for only one cup was left in the coffee pot. Slade pressed it upon the traveler, who dared not decline, yet was afraid to accept. Finally he rode away, relieved at the thought that he was not to be the twenty-seventh man, and remembering Slade only as the possessor of a pair of high cheek-bones and a polite manner.

Something of this same indefiniteness seems to characterize most other articles touching on Slade and written from personal experience. Consequently there is an air of mystery about Slade that intensifies one's interest in him and leads to an earnest desire to learn more about this frontier paradox. From men who knew Slade the writer has been able to gather some new material regarding this strange character who left a trail of blood in several Rocky Mountain states.

LADE was a native of Carlisle, Illinois. At the age of thirteen he killed a man whom he struck with a stone. This man had interfered with Slade and some boyish companions in their play. Slade's father succeeded in getting him out of the country and sending him to Texas, where he grew to manhood and was married. In Texas he was a freighter after the Mexican War, in which conflict he served with credit, being given a special commendation for personal bravery. The opening of the Overland Trail offered better opportunities in the freighting business, so, at the age of thirty, Slade engaged in transporting supplies between Westport, now Kansas City, and Julesburg, now in eastern Colorado.

While he was engaged in freighting Slade made an enemy of Jules Beni, a half-breed trapper and guide who kept the stage station and trading post at Julesburg, and this enmity grew into a feud. Jules, as he was familiarly called, and from whom Julesburg takes its name, has been described as an ignorant man, but stage officials claim that in reality he was a brave, shrewd, and determined French Canadian. Like many of his kind, he had married an Indian squaw, but this was a practice common among trappers and traders in early days. Jules was not afraid of Slade, and every time the superintendent visited Julesburg station there were words between the two.

One day Slade came down to Julesburg while he was on a spree and gave it out that he intended to kill Jules. Jules knew that Slade would carry out his threat, so he posted himself behind the door of the station and, when he saw Slade coming, fired both barrels of a "messenger gun"—a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun, loaded with buckshot and slugs. Slade fell, almost cut to pieces, but finally Dr. Latham, the post surgeon at Fort Laramie, pulled him through; in three or four months Slade was back on his feet.

Slade always intimated that he had secured information indicating that Jules was the leader of one of the gangs of organized horse-thieves that had run off many thousands of dollars' worth of the valuable stock of the Overland Stage Company. These horses, which were the pride of Ben Holliday, the millionaire owner of the Overland Stage line, could not be replaced except at great expense. Yet, in spite of the heavy guard that was put over the corrals at the stage stations, the horses, mules, feed, and everything else of value disappeared with a regularity that threatened to bankrupt the entire system.

The officials who tried to grapple with the problem were baffled, one after another, or were frightened off by the determined demeanor of some of the outlaws whom they had cornered. To add to the troubles of the company the Indians were particularly bold and successful in getting any stock that the white outlaws overlooked. Holliday himself was on the verge of desperation as the demoralization threatened to spread from the Julesburg branch to other divisions of the stage line. It was only a question of time until the outlawry along the stage line would be so well organized that the company would have to go out of business.

At this juncture entered Jack Slade, small of stature, quiet of voice, keen of eye, with the assurance that he could straighten out the affairs of the stage company on the Julesburg division. He was given the opportunity to "make good" and a superintendency was his. Slade descended on the division like the traditional destroying angel. He rode sometimes with the drivers on the big Concord stages, sometimes alone on a half broken pony, sometimes surrounded by a bodyguard headed by "Jim" Cochran and "New York" Thompson, as fearless as himself; but always he seemed to be shooting, and shooting to kill.

Weather-beaten old-timers who drove

stage or rode Pony Express over Slade's route in those adventurous days agree that Slade's conquest of that hotbed of outlawry is something unparalleled in Western history. He showed no mercy to those who were caught red-handed, or to those who were mere suspects, but slew all alike.

Besides the terror he created among the white outlaws, Slade inaugurated a campaign against the Indians, and the troublesome Cheyennes and Arapahoes were soon driven back into the hills. Soon it was no longer a common occurrence for a stage driver to come in and report an Indian attack, or for a Pony Express rider to be compelled to make a wide detour to avoid an ambush.

In Jules, Slade found a foeman who was not easily frightened. In fact, the manful halfbreed, when warned to get out of the country, said he intended to remain and finish his work by killing Slade next time they met. Unfortunately for Jules, he fell into the hands of some of Slade's lieutenants, who captured and bound him and carried him helpless to the superintendent at the station of Horseshoe. There Slade, showing no more mercy than an Indian, tied Jules to the "snubbing post" in the corral and practised marksmanship on him. As a crowning bit of savagery, after the death of his victim, Slade cut off Jules's ears and exhibited them as trophies.

This has been disputed, but old-time stage drivers and Pony Express riders whose runs were on Slade's division have assured the writer that Slade did cut off Jules's ears and that it was his common practice, when drunk, to enter a barroom and, reaching into his vest pocket, draw forth a withered ear.

"Give me change for that!" he would shout, throwing the gruesome relic on the counter.

IT WAS Slade's custom when drunk to shoot up saloons and dance-halls and it was a common saying when Slade appeared in some Western town that somebody would have to pay for new lamps and mirrors before morning. Saloon-keepers did not object to the destruction of their glassware in such fashion, as Slade's little eccentricities in that line always attracted a big crowd and invariably the saloon did enough business to pay for the damage. Slade was known to break several hundred dollars' worth of lamps and glassware, including plate glass mirrors, in a Denver saloon and get away without so much as a feeble protest from the owner or the inmates, most of whom were found cowering under the tables or had been frightened into the street. Next day Slade would be on hand early and with the most abject apologies.

On one occasion, in Denver, Slade shot his best friend, David Street, who was paymaster of the Overland Stage system. Street was the idol of every man and boy in the entire system, from Ben Holliday down. He was an incessant traveler and had the faculty of harmonizing all the rough elements that had been gathered to make up the working force of this novel organization. When he fell, desperately wounded by Slade, whom he was trying to disarm, the latter came near being lynched. Next day, on learning what he had done, Slade was wild with grief and probably would have destroyed himself had Street not recovered.

Slade was not always victorious in his personal clashes. He was overawed once by a little stage driver known as "Rowdy Pete," who was even smaller than Slade physically but who had an equal supply of courage. Slade and Rowdy Pete became engaged in an altercation in a barroom at Green River, and to the astonishment of everybody, Rowdy Pete, after giving Slade an artistic tongue-lashing, walked up to the man-killer and took his gun away from him and pulled his nose. For some unexplainable reason Slade never took serious offense at this but passed it off as a joke, and Rowdy Pete continued to drive back and forth on the line as usual. Perhaps this was an instance wherein Slade the law-bringer rose superior to Slade the outlaw and Rowdy Pete was spared because he was an employee of the company whose interests Slade was guarding so jealously.

John Provo, a French Canadian trapper who had a trading post and saloon that was patronized by trappers and hunters near Court House Rock, once made Slade admit that he was beaten. Slade came into his place drunk and began abusing Provo and threatening to take his life. Catching Slade in an unguarded moment, Provo jerked out a revolver which he leveled at the stage superintendent. Slade saw that the other man had the drop on him and made no move to draw his weapon.

Keeping his eye on Slade, Provo walked slowly out from behind the bar, meanwhile telling the superintendent that if he moved

death would be the result. Then, walking up close to Slade, Provo thrust his revolver under the very nose of the man-killer and told him to get out. Slade quietly retreated, Provo following, and the trapper did not relax his vigilance until the superintendent had mounted his horse and ridden away. Slade bore no enmity for this, although Provo's friends told the trapper that he would probably pay the forfeit with his life.

Slade's rule on the Overland Stage line was so severe that most of the employees were in deadly fear of him and would never think of the slightest wilful infraction of any rule he made. Early one winter there had been a wholesale horse-stealing expedition successfully conducted by three young hunters and trappers known as the Davenport brothers. The young horse-thieves managed to get a good start, but were trailed across Utah and were overtaken near the Nevada line. One of the brothers was killed and one was caught and lynched, but the other escaped.

Several weeks later a tired, foot-sore, and dilapidated young fellow applied for food and shelter at the stage station in Wyoming. He was told that Slade had laid down strict rules against sheltering or feeding anyone except employees of the company. This rule Slade insisted on so strongly that the company employee who disobeyed it practically signed his own death warrant. In this case, however, the wanderer's plight was so pitiable that the station keeper said he would take a chance. He expected Slade that very night, but the weather was so cold that to turn the man away meant that he would freeze to death in a short time. The situation was explained to the young fellow, and after being fed he was told he could crawl under a big pile of empty gunny-sacks in one corner of the adobe house that served as a station.

About midnight Slade came in on the regular stage, and as was his custom, ate a piece of pie while the horses were being changed. The station keeper was much relieved when Slade went on his way without discovering the stranger under the gunny-sacks. Early the next morning the young fellow was given another meal and sent on his way, after he had promised the station keeper that he would not betray the kindness that had been done in defiance of Slade's orders.

Two days later Slade came back from the East on the stage, and with him, shackled hand and foot, and with a big iron bar connecting both shackles, was the young fellow who had been lodged at the station. He gave no indication that he ever had met the station keeper and in a few minutes that perturbed individual mustered up courage to ask Slade, indifferently, what kind of passenger he had that required a hundred pounds of iron on him to hold him in his seat.

"Why, don't you know who it is?" asked Slade in his quiet manner. "This is the last one of the Davenport brothers, the one that got away.'

"What are you going to do with this one?" inquired the station keeper.

"Oh," said Slade, "the Pony Express rider at Laramie passed word that the boys want him there, and preparations are being made now to hang him."

By that time the horses had been changed and Slade drove on with his passenger, who was still outwardly indifferent to his benefactor. The next stage driver reported that Slade's passenger was assisted to alight in the center of the bridge over the Laramie River. After adjusting a rope around his neck, the crowd requested him to jump off the railing, which he obligingly did.

"What would you have done had Davenport peached on you?" was asked of the station keeper in later years.

"I would have packed up my blankets and some bacon and hiked for the sagebrush at jack-rabbit speed," was the answer. "Slade was in no mood to put up with the slightest infraction of his rules that winter. He would have killed me without waiting for any explanation."

THE late Robert Spotswood of Denver, who succeeded Slade as division superintendent on the Overland State line, told the writer that Slade, when sober, was one of the most charming acquaintances that could be imagined. He was well educated, a good conversationalist, quiet, and unassuming, and would be taken for a law-abiding citizen in any community.

"Liquor seemed to change Slade into a demon," said Mr. Spotswood. "Men fled from his presence terrified at his strange actions when under the control of whisky. I have seen him froth at the mouth while his face was more like that of a fiend than a human being. It was while he was under the influence of liquor that he did

many of the atrocious acts that horrified even the rough frontier. Nobody knows how many men Slade killed, but unquestionably it was a great number. When I was told to relieve him as division superintendent my friends at Denver assured me that I would be killed, that Slade would murder me rather than turn over the position he had filled so long. But I said I had the necessary authority and I intended to see that my orders were obeyed.

"I went to Virginia Dale, which was then the superintendent's headquarters, and told Slade I was to succeed him. Slade was sober and manifested no surprise or displeasure. On the contrary, I was well entertained, Slade and his wife fairly outdoing themselves to be pleasant. Next day Slade turned over all his stock and accounts in good shape, and, taking his own stock, went to Virginia City, Montana, where he again engaged in the freighting business."

Slade's methods were so successful in solving the troubles that threatened disaster to the Overland Stage Company, that the superintendent of the Julesburg division was in high favor with the officials.

After the stage line had been removed to the southern route, Slade made his headquarters at Virginia Dale, one hundred miles northwest of Denver on the Cherokee Trail. His wife was named Virginia, and the superintendent, as a compliment to her, named his new headquarters Virginia Dale. It was a beautifully romantic spot on Dale Creek, a sparkling trout stream. In front of Slade's quarters rose a picturesque mountain known as Lover's Leap. Slade built a log house of pine and cedar, with stables and huge corrals for the company's stock, and made it an ideal station, some of which is still in evidence.

In time of emergency, if a stage driver was killed or injured, Slade was ever ready to step into the breach. He was an expert driver. On one of his trips an officer from Fort Laramie, who was traveling as a passenger, desired to travel at a higher rate of speed than the coach was then making. Slade climbed into the driver's seat, took the reins and tooled the big Concord coach across the Wyoming prairies and through fords at a breakneck pace. At several turns in the road it seemed inevitable that the coach would go over, but Slade's skill as a driver just saved it. When the coach rattled into the next station with the horses white with foam, it was a very meek soldier who climbed out of the doorway.

The new stage line to Denver and thence East, went through a quiet country compared with the old line. There were no outlaws and Indians to engage Slade's attention. He could not slay in the performance of duty, and, when it came to killing as an amusement, the community was inclined to frown upon him. Complaints that could not be ignored reached the officers of the stage company.

Finally, Slade capped the climax when, with Bob Scott and a motley collection of frontier companions, he wound up a drunken spree by actually taking possession of the sutler's quarters at Fort Halleck during the absence of most of the command, and "shooting up" the place. Slade and his companions shot holes in the tin cans on the shelves in the sutler's store and then punctured a molasses barrel with bullets and allowed the contents to flow over the floor in a sticky mass. Then they poured flour into the molasses, after which they did a "walk-around' in the conglomerate mass.

This insult to the authority of the commandant at Fort Halleck was more than that official could brook. He forwarded an official complaint and it was decided that Slade must be superseded. Accordingly, Mr. Spotswood was armed with authority to take Slade's place, and the latter's career on the Overland Stage line ended ingloriously.

SLADE prospered in the freighting business in Virginia City. He had a large amount of personal stock, horses, mules and wagons, and carried supplies from the Missouri River to Virginia City. At that time the Virginia City boom was at its height and there was a demand for all the supplies that could be brought in. Freight charges were high, and Slade made much money. It has been claimed that he was associated with the notorious gang of outlaws, headed by Sheriff Plummer, that robbed stage-coaches and slew miners who were returning home with their gold dust, and that made life and property insecure in Montana until the Vigilantes were organized.

Slade located a ranch on Meadow Creek, twelve miles from Virginia City. His wife was a beautiful and respected woman and Slade was devoted to her, but his law-

less instincts seemed to be getting the better of him. His employment did not bring the better side of his manhood to the fore, as in Wyoming. Frequently he made visits to Virginia City and shot up the town in his customary manner when in liquor. He terrorized the community for several months, but finally the tribunal established by the Vigilantes warned him that the next infraction of the law would be his last.

Slade, like all gamblers, was intensely superstitious. Shortly before his death a friend met him on the street and told him that he had dreamed a mob had hung Slade and established a reign of order in Virginia City. Slade turned pale and showed deep agitation. He seemed to show a childish fear of death and asked eagerly if "the boys" would harm him if he settled down and behaved himself. He was told that there was a chance for him under those circumstances and he promised that he would quit drinking and become a moral citizen.

In less than two weeks Slade was again engaged in his work of folly. He destroyed a writ that had been served on him by the sheriff, and defied Judge Davis, the head of the Vigilantes' court, to arrest him. On sobering up he realized the seriousness of his error and begged the judge's pardon. The Vigilantes could not brook this insult to their court, however, and held a meeting and voted to hang Slade. Fifteen thousand miners flocked to Virginia City and formally identified Slade, and, in spite of Judge Davis's plea to banish the man, a gallows was prepared at the gate of a corral.

Slade broke down utterly, falling on his knees and sobbing while pleading for his life. He asked that word be sent to his wife, and a messenger accordingly was despatched. The Vigilantes knew, however, that if they waited until Mrs. Slade arrived they would be unable to withstand her pleadings. The execution was hurried along and, by the time his wife had made the ride from his ranch to Virginia City, Slade was cold in death. Mrs. Slade denounced the executioners as cowards, but it was the general opinion in the camp that nothing more than justice had been done. Slade's body was taken to Salt Lake City, where it was buried, and Mrs. Slade returned to the Middle West, where she remarried.

There are few traces left today of the old Overland Stage road in Colorado and Wyoming over which Slade exercised his jurisdiction and emphasized his rule at the point of the revolver. When the Union Pacific Railroad was projected the stage route was practically abandoned. Most of the old stage stations fell into decay or were put to base uses as barns for ranchers. Occasionally, however, the traveler who departs from the beaten highways in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming will come upon one of these adobe buildings which will be pointed out as one of Slade's way stations.

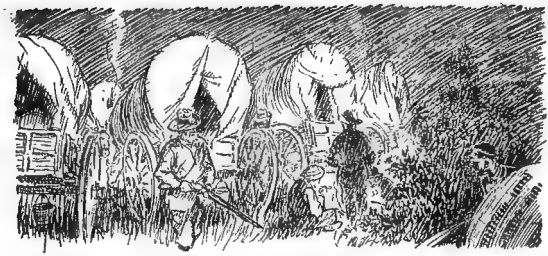
Slade's nature seems to have been a strange mixture of heroism and cowardice. It is certain that he faced and overcame conditions during his days on the Overland Stage line that would have discouraged any but a man with iron will and determination. The Overland Stage line was more or less of an experiment. It was no stronger than its weakest link, which was the division Slade took under his personal charge. If he had failed, the whole line might have been thrown into chaos.

It was a situation similar to that which later prevailed in several frontier towns where marshals were recruited from the ranks of gun-fighting bad-men and proved to be efficient officers of the law. But the West seems to remember Slade only in his rôle as a man-killer, a rôle in which apparently he was supreme.

FRONTIER JUSTICE

ONE of the earliest justices in Ohio was one Squire Peter Worst, a tailor by trade. He invariably heard the cases while sitting cross-legged on his tailor's table, generally continuing his work during the trial. One day a case was heard before him and while the plaintiff's side was being argued he continued sewing. Then he stopped work long enough to make several entries in his docket, and again returned to his needle. The counsel for the defendant, getting impatient, asked, "Doesn't the court wish to hear any evidence on the other side?"

To which Squire Worst replied: "Oh yes. You can talk as long as you please, but I have decided the case in favor of the plaintiff."—H. J. A.



THREE THOUSANDS ACRES

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Gold, wealth, power, adventure drew these Pioneers into wild Mashonaland, but one hanger-on of the wagon train heard only the call of the land—a farm, a homestead. To the Runt, stalking lions and savage Matabele were as nothing compared to this glorious opportunity

HIS mother, vaguely remembering the name of the steampacket—eleven hundred tons burden, per register—which brought her to America in 1842, called him Hercuły; then she turned over on the sawdust-stuffed mattress, faced the cracked, filth-smeared wall and fell asleep dreaming of neat hedges and green fields. Luckily for her, she never woke again.

His father sometimes called him the "brat"; more frequently he threw things at him, or kicked him, or used his belt. It all depended on his degree of drunkenness. Yet John Morton was a good father, as slum fathers go, and when he was killed by a truck Hercules cried bitterly.

Hercules was nearly twelve then, though he had the physique of an eight-year-old, pale-faced and hollow-cheeked.

He had a vague longing for something that was not of the city and thought Tim Murphy, the saloon-keeper, would lend him enough money to get away, or at least give him a job so that he could earn money. He had great faith in Tim Murphy. Wasn't the hog-fat saloon-keeper his father's greatest friend? At least Hercules knew that his father had spent the majority of his waking hours at Murphy's place.

"Give you a job, me bhoy?" Murphy exclaimed when Hercules timidly explained his predicament. "Sure an' I will. Fifty cints a week and board. That's generous now, ain't it? Why, if ye're careful an' savin', ye'll have as much as a hundred dollars by the time ye're twinty—maybe more. Then ye can go to them places out West ye talk about, an' buy land, an' cattle, an' shoot Injuns. Sure ye can."

For eight long years Hercules Morton—everybody called him "Runt" now—slaved for Tim Murphy, and at the end of that time he had not saved a cent of his princely salary. Perhaps the fact that all breakages were taken from his pay had something to do with that, and, of course, Murphy was well within his rights. A pot-boy had no right to be careless.

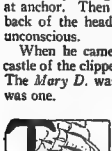
When the Runt was twenty, and looked a puny sixteen—long hours of hard work in a vile atmosphere, little sleep and scanty rations do not promote physical development—death once more threw him on his own resources. He shed no tears this time; neither did he attend Murphy's elaborate funeral.

Instead, he slept for twenty-four hours and then, awakening with a guilty start, crept up from his bunk in the basement, and opened the door of the saloon. He stood there for a few minutes, leaning against the door, endeavoring to orient himself to his new-found freedom, summoning up courage to face what the world

had to offer. Of this he was determined: he was through with the saloon.

Presently he passed out into the street, a frightened, furtive expression on his face as if expecting any moment to hear Murphy's raucous voice calling him back to work. He crept very slowly down the street, crossing from one side to the other in an attempt to avoid coming in contact with the sidewalk loungers. He came to a halt at the waterfront. Sitting down on a coil of rope, he gazed vacantly at the ships at anchor. Then something hit him on the back of the head and he pitched forward unconscious.

When he came to, he was in the forecastle of the clipper, *Mary D*, Frisco bound. The *Mary D.* was a hell-ship if there ever was one.



THAT was the beginning of eight more years of servitude for the Runt, and he hated every minute of it with a fierce hate which so completely filled his being that there was no room in his puny body for other emotions.

It wasn't the work which created this hate; even on the *Bonny May*, the fiercest hell-ship of them all, life was easier than it had been at Tim Murhpy's. More blows came his way, true; in place of one master he now had over thirty—but he slept longer; he ate his fill of nourishing food; and fresh clean air was blown into his lungs whether he would have it or no. All of which was exceedingly beneficial.

It put flesh on the Runt's bones, color into his cheeks, and cleared the muddiness from his eyes. It increased his girth, even if it was too late to increase his stature beyond puny five foot four and a half. It made him a man, muscular and quick on his feet, but it could not break down the hedge of silence behind which he had sought to protect himself during his pot-boy days; it could not cure him of his intense hatred of the sea and her ways.

Not all the packets he sailed on were hell-ships, but that made no difference in the Runt's attitude, for with his hatred went fear. It was that which put him always at the mercy of the youngest and greenest apprentice and made life on board any ship one continual round of misery.

Five times he rounded the Horn; twice he was wrecked. He went on voyages to the Far East and the Near East; to the North lands and the South lands. He saw nearly every one of the world's big ports and at each one had endeavored to jump ship.

Several times he had met with success, had watched his vessel up-anchor and sail away, leaving him behind. Each time he had repaired to some waterfront dive to celebrate his emancipation in a drink or two. He was not a drinking man, and each time he failed to notice the sweet-bitter taste of the liquor served him. Several hours later he had awakened to find himself shanghaied aboard another ship, bound for God knows where.

The Runt was the victim of four such experiences before he gained wisdom. When he jumped ship at Port Elizabeth, in 1879, after eight years of ships, the sea and hell, he loitered not a moment about the waterfront, but made his way hotfoot for the interior.

He was penniless, poorly clad, ignorant of the country and its ways; yet two months later he arrived at Jo'burg when that place was entering into the last phase of its first big boom. There the Runt found employment at high wages, doing pick and shovel work for an aristocratic gold-digger who considered himself above manual labor.

What the Runt made he saved. His expenses were few; he had never known luxuries and, consequently, never desired them. He never entered a saloon, remembering his past experiences, fearing that he would fall asleep and wake up again in hell.

Besides, he knew now what he wanted. On board ship he had thought that just to be on land would be sufficient happiness, but now he knew differently. He wanted to own land. Not a refuse-strewn city lot, or even a New England farm like the one Chips, on his last ship, was talking about continually. What the Runt wanted was a thousand acre farm, clean, wide acres. He did not put the emphasis on farm—he knew nothing about farming—but on acres. In that he finally expressed the longing he had experienced years ago when he applied to Tim Murphy for a job, the longing which had been with him all through his tribulations at sea.

That dream did not seem impossible now. He had already spoken to a Boer farmer who named a price and thought that the Runt must be a little mad to be prepared to pay the first sum named for worthless, barren acres when there was so much gold to be taken from the ground at Jo'burg for the mere labor of digging.

But the Runt thought the Boer mad, thus evening matters, and worked happily and saved carefully.

"In two years I'll be able to buy," he told himself one night as he gleefully counted his wealth.

The next morning the boom broke. Men who yesterday had considered themselves well on the way to becoming millionaires, were now penniless. It was the verdict everywhere that Jo'burg had seen its best days, and there was a general exodus from the place.

The Runt's aristocratic employer, dead broke, was unable to pay the little man his last month's wages and, to add insult to injury, borrowed from him carfare to Cape Town.

The Runt was despondent. Living expenses suddenly leaped sky-high and his savings were being slowly, but surely depleted. He tried frantically to get another job but, finding himself in direct competition with bigger and more experienced men, without success.

THEN, when at about the end of his tether, he ran into Jack Frostley, a young American whose acquaintance he had made at the diggings.

The last time he had seen Frostley, that man had not a cent to his name and was dressed in filthy rags. Now he was smartly dressed in a uniform consisting of a tunic of brown corduroy, corduroy trousers, leather leggings and stout army boots. For headgear he wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, the crown creased and the brim pinned up on the left side.

He greeted the Runt enthusiastically, slapping the little man on the back with such force as to almost send him sprawling to the ground.

"What are yer tryin' to do, yer big lout?" the Runt growled. "You knocked all the breath out of me, man." The Runt spoke a weird jargon, a composite of dialects heard in the saloon at Murphy's and aboard ship.

Frostley laughed.

"How d'you like my get-up, Runt?" he asked.

The Runt sneered; inwardly he was green with envy. He walked around Frostley, eying him from head to foot.

"'Sall right," he finally conceded. "But what are yer dressed up for? Playing Santy Claws?"

"Sure—in a way, that is. I'm going up north to teach the Matabele how to behave. Ain't you heard nothing about the Pioneers? I'm one of them."

The Runt hadn't heard of the Pioneers; but, then, neither had he heard anything about the Rudd-Rhodes concession, or the company which had been formed to exploit the land of the Matabele—although he must have been the only man in South Africa who was ignorant of the plans to rob a savage ruler of his kingdom, and dispossess a savage race of its heritage. So, being ignorant, the Runt just grunted.

"Don't see why you have to dress up that way just to hunt up and kill a few niggers." The Runt's opinion of South Africa's black population was based entirely on such natives as he had come in contact with at the diggings; of them he was highly contemptuous. He could, as he so often told himself, do more work in a day than any ten of them. "Why," he continued reflectively, "I bet Cap'n Brown of the *Bonnie May* an' his two mates, could wipe out every nigger in the country with their bare fists."

"You're talking like a fool, Runt," Frostley said hotly. "Say, Matabeleland is as big as all get-out, and they've got fifty thousand trained fighters. We're not going on no picnic, let me tell you. One of the big English army know-it-alls said it 'ud take fifty thousand whites to lick the Matabele; but there's only four hundred of us, an' we're going to do the trick—if we ain't all killed first, that is. We're likely to be, as soon as we set foot in Lo Ben's country."

"Lo Ben? Who's him?"

"Lobenguella, king of the Matabele. They say he's got five hundred wives. A bloodthirsty old devil he is, too."

"What're yer trying to do? Having a game with me?" the Runt asked suspiciously. "If this affair's so dangerous, what do you get out of it? Fer a man what's likely to be killed pretty soon, you've got more laughs than a Cheshire Cat."

"Well," Frostley began slowly, "us Troopers get our equipment free, rifles, revolvers, horses and all that. And we get seven and sixpence a'day and grub."

The Runt's eyes opened wide. At last he was interested, for here, he thought, was a way out of his present difficulty. He, too would be a Pioneer. He figured that he could save all, or at least nearly

all, of his pay. The farm was not a lost cause yet.

"And you get that just for chasing a few niggers?" he asked incredulously.

Frostley swore impatiently, then, realizing how hopeless it would be to try to explain to the Runt the magnitude of the task which confronted the little band of whites, he continued triumphantly.

"And that's not all, Runt. When we get up to Mashonaland——"

"I thought it was Matabeleland?"

"That's what I said. We have to go through Matabeleland before we get up to the Mashona country. Lo Ben's given us permission to go through his country and mine there; but we can't settle. Anyway, the Mashonas are sort of slaves of his. Well, as I was saying, when we get there we each have a right to locate fifteen mining claims. What do you think of that?"

The Runt was unmoved. Mining claims did not interest him.

"Not much," he said mildly. "Is that all?"

"Is that all, the man asks!" Frostley exclaimed indignantly. "What more do you want? There are supposed to be richer reefs up there than this one ever thought of being. But that's not all, as a matter of fact. Besides that, we each get a three-thousand-acre farm."

Runt's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"Three thousand acres," he cried. "That settles it. I'm going to be a Pioneer, too. Come on, Frostley. Show me where to go an' what to do?"

He grabbed the other by the arm in his eagerness.

Frostley shook his head.

"There's not a chance for you, Runt. Captain Mandy, who did the recruiting here, got all the men he wants. He's turning them away now by the hundreds."

"He'll take me if you ask him to," the Runt exclaimed with forced confidence. "You take me to him."

"I tell you it's no use, Runt. He's picked his men and, even if he hadn't, why—say, I only just got by; and I can ride and shoot, I know the country. But you——"

"Take me to him," the Runt pleaded.

"No, I won't, and that's final," Frostley said decisively. "Mandy's a hard-bitten devil and he'd give me hell if I bothered him about a runt like you. But I'll tell you what: got any money?"

Runt shook his head violently. He had a few pounds left, but he was afraid Frostley's question was paving the way for a loan.

"Then here's five quid. You beat it for Mafeking and ask for Captain Heany. He's a damned good sport. Tell him you were born in Georgia. Maybe he'll find a place for you in his Troop. Good-by and good luck."

Frostley slapped the Runt on the back and walked swiftly away, his spurs jangling musically.

WHEN the Runt reached Mafeking a week or more later, he found that little frontier town of wattle-and-daub a busy hive of industry. Its normal population of only a hundred whites had been increased to over five hundred. The extra five hundred were all Pioneers, who spent the day time drilling, and their nights drinking and holding farewell concerts.

Big men from the Cape Colony had come up to review them; they had been addressed by clergy who likened them to the Crusaders of old. Not an altogether apt comparison: the first Crusaders fought for an ideal, for a principle. The Pioneers were about to risk their lives, maybe, but the stakes were big. The vision behind their motives was gold.

The Runt, however, was not interested in the pros and cons of the matter but lost no time in accosting one of the Pioneers, a big, full-bearded man.

"Say, guv'nor," he asked. "where'll I find Captain Heany?"

"Heany? What do you want with him?"

"That's my business. You take me to him, an' I'll give you a quid."

The other looked at the Runt with interest.

"Hand over the quid, then."

"You mean it?" the Runt countered suspiciously.

"Of course."

Runt took a large red, cotton handkerchief from his pocket and, unknotting one corner of it, exposed ten sovereigns. One of these he handed to the man with the beard; the others he carefully tied up in the handkerchief again.

"Come on now," he said excitedly. "Keep your word."

The other laughed. "I don't have to take you anywhere, you see—I'm Captain Heany."

"You Captain Heany?" the Runt asked incredulously.

"Sure! Now what do you want?"

"I want to be a Pioneer and——"

"We're full up," the other interrupted. "But let me see. Ah, yes. It might be worked. How much money have you got?"

"Nine quid and a few odd shillings."

"Um! Not much. But I'll see what I can do. Yes. I think I can manage it. Give me your money and——"

At that moment a man emerged from a nearby tent.

"Forbes!" he called.

The man with a beard, swore softly under his breath then turned round, and saluted.

"Just see if you can find Sergeant Dixon for me, will you?"

"Yes, sir," said the bearded one, and hurried away.

"I say," the Runt squealed. "Did you say his name was Forbes?"

"Yes—why?"

"And it's not Heany? Captain Heany?"

"No——"

The Runt did not stop to hear any more. Running swiftly in the direction taken by the bearded one, he soon caught up with him and, leaping on him from behind, brought him to the ground with a thud.

They rolled over and over, kicking, struggling, cursing, the Runt clinging to the bearded one with a tenacious hold. Presently Forbes managed to rise to his feet, the Runt still on his back, and staggered to a drinking trough close by. There he succeeded in loosing the Runt's hold and pitched him head-first into the water.

"There—you!" he panted. "That ought to take some of the spunk out of you."

But it didn't. The Runt leaped from the trough as if it had been a spring-board and attacked again with renewed fury.

"You dirty liar!" he shouted. "Give me back my quid. Make out you're a officer, will you. You——"

Forbes met him with a straight left which bowled him over like a ninepin. In a moment he was up again and rushed in again. This time he dodged Forbes's straight-arm left, getting inside it, and closed with the big man. Therein the Runt showed poor strategy, for the other's arm closed on him with a bear-like grip, pinning his arms to his sides. The Runt's struggles became weaker and weaker; he gasped painfully for breath; he kicked once or twice at Forbes's shins, but his kicks were poorly aimed and lacked power. Loud noises, like the pealing of bells, sounded in his ears; his vision was blurred

"Had enough?" growled Forbes.

"No," the Runt half-sobbed.

Forbes's grip on him tightened.

"What's this?" It was the voice of the man who had come from the tent to give Forbes an order. "What are you men fighting about?"

"He's got a dirty mouth, sir," Forbes stammered.

"If he's got a dirtier mouth than you, Forbes, he must be a jewel," the voice said caustically. It sounded to the Runt as if it came from a great distance. "Let him go."

Forbes completely released his hold on the Runt, who sat down suddenly in the red dust of the veld and glared ferociously at his antagonist

"Get out of here, Forbes," the officer ordered curtly, before the Runt could regain his feet and renew the attack. "Go and find Sergeant Dixon. Sharp's the word now."

Forbes went. The officer looked at the Runt, and grinned. The Runt was a comical figure; his battered felt hat, pulled down tightly, hiding half his face, his clothes much too big for him. As he sat there in the puddle of mud, made by the water which had dripped off his clothes and mingled with the red dust, he looked like a badly made scarecrow.

"Whatcha laughin' at," he asked sullenly as he rose to his feet, pushing his hat back from his forehead.

"At you."

"Pity you can't find somethin' else to laugh at then. I don't like it." The Runt was as belligerent as a bantam-cock. "Where'd that big bum go to?"

"Never mind him. What were you fighting about?"

"I gave him a quid to take me to Captain Heany and——"

"What did you want to see Captain Heany about? Do you know him?"

"Sure, I know him. Me and him went to school together. He's going to get me on the Pioneers."

"I see. Well—go on."

"Well, when I give him the quid, he said he was Captain Heany and that he'd get me on the force if I gave him another nine quid. And I was goin' to—all I had——"

"But if you knew Captain Heany you ought to have known he wasn't Heany."

"Well, you see, I haven't seen the captain for a long time and——"

"I see," interrupted the captain. "Well, as it happens, I'm Captain Heany."

The Runt groaned.

"My Gord. And do I have to fight you, too? How much do you want?"

"Then you don't think I'm Captain Heany, eh?"

The Runt spat.

"No, I think—" he began, then stopped and looked up into the other's clear gray eyes, noted his erect carriage and the firm dominant jaw, wondered at the soft drawl of the officer's voice. "Damn my eyes," the Runt said at last, greatly confused, "I believe you are him. Are you, sir?"

Heany nodded.

"Oh, Gord!" the Runt exclaimed lugubriously. "There's my last chance gone. But it ain't, is it? I didn't go for to speak to you like I did. You'll let me join up, won't you, sir? I was born in Georgia —"

"What?"

"I was born in Georgia," the Runt repeated glibly, remembering Frostley's advice and half-believing it to be a sort of pass word.

"Yes, I heard that," Heany said dryly. "But did you say you wanted to be a Pioneer?"

"Yes, sir."

Heany was on the point of laughing, but something about the Runt's earnestness made him check it and he looked curiously at the little man.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Morton, sir. Hercules Morton," the Runt said and then waited with eager expectation.

Heany's lips twitched and he turned his head for a moment.

"So your name's Hercules, eh?" he commented.

"Yes, sir. Though nearly everybody calls me Runt. I may be small, but I can do as much work as a man twice my size."

Heany stroked his mustache as he thoughtfully examined the Runt from head to foot. He noted particularly the Runt's red thatch of hair, a still redder stubbled growth on his face, and the mild blue eyes peering out of a face tanned a rich mahogany by the sun and salt breezes.

"What part of Georgia do you hail from?" Heany demanded suddenly.

"From, from—" the Runt stammered.

"You're a damned liar, you know, Morton," Heany cut in sarcastically. "New York or London pupped you. Now get out of here."

The Runt walked away dejectedly. Then Heany called him back, remembering, perhaps, the lessons he had learned at West Point and Indian fighting with Custer.

"Look here, Morton," he explained carefully as the Runt returned with renewed hope, "there's not a chance in the world of your getting taken on. You can't ride, can you, or shoot—the truth now."

The Runt shook his head.

"And you know nothing of the country?"

Again the negative shake of the head.

"And you see," continued Heany, "we had to pick our men very carefully. The mistake of one man may mean the death of us all. You see?"

The Runt nodded.

"Why do you want to go so badly?"

"It was the farm, sir. You see I want to own some land and—you're sure there ain't no chance for me?"

"Quite sure," and Heany turned away, the Runt forgotten, some detail concerning the management of the camp demanding his attention.

THAT night and all the next day the Runt hung about the camp of the Pioneers, listening to scraps of conversation, accosting first one officer then another until one threatened to shoot him on sight if he showed his face again. He said it so viciously that the Runt thought he meant it and deemed it the better part of valor to keep out of the way of all officers. Thereafter he confined his importunities to the rank and file, concentrating on the men of Captain Heany's troop.

It is not quite clear what he hoped to gain from them, but he did everything possible to earn their good opinions. No task was too menial for him to perform. He ran errands for them and helped clean their equipment; he washed their clothes in the muddy waters of the Molopo and sewed on buttons.

In return, he was given the freedom of the camp and treated by the men with a good-humored tolerance. Some of the men tipped him and his little horde of savings gradually grew. At meal-times he was always on hand to help the men who were detailed to act as cooks—grilling meat on the coals, baking bread in the ashes of the camp-fires—and there was always plenty of food left for the Runt.

The fourth night after the Runt's arrival a violent thunderstorm broke over the camp. The rain came down in an almost

solid sheet, turning the ground into a quagmire of thick, sticky mud. Everything was in a turmoil. Campfires went out with a weak, protesting hiss; tents were blown away, and the oxen, bellowing with fear, attempted to stampede.

Men, some half-clad, some entirely naked, were running aimlessly about in the darkness, endeavoring to bring order out of chaos, but only succeeding in adding to the confusion.

The Runt, safe and dry in his hiding-place under the tarpaulin of one of the wagons, slept soundly until, with a noisy spluttering, the engine which generated electricity for the searchlight was started.

Then the Runt's awakening was sudden. The engine was mounted on the wagon he had chosen for a bedroom and the vibrations of it aroused unpleasant memories; he had made several voyages on a steamship. With a strangled yell he sat up, knocking his head violently on the wagon seat. That convinced him; he was in a narrow bunk aboard ship. He cowered down, half-expecting a heavy boot to be thrown at him by the man in the bunk above. At sea the Runt was totally lacking in courage!

Heightening the effect of his delusion, the voices of men came to him: they were swearing, as men of the sea can swear, picturesque, full-blooded oaths. The terms "fore and aft," "port and starboard," registered on the Runt's consciousness.

"Shanghaied again, by Gord," he groaned.

Then a mule brayed and the Runt, with a sickly grin at his alarm, remembered that he was hundreds of miles from the sea—and safe; that the men he thought were sailors were English navy men detailed to accompany the expedition in order to work the machine-guns and seven-pounders. In his relief, the Runt cursed with a religious fervor.

The storm died down; order was restored; the engine was stopped and the searchlight went out. All was quiet. But the Runt did not sleep again. He had noticed that the sky was paling in the east and knew that in a little while the bugles would rouse the Pioneers to the routine of a new day, and he had no desire to be caught napping. They had caught him asleep once in a wagon and his awakening had been most unceremonious.

Presently the Runt climbed down from the wagon and cautiously made his way through the camp, heading for the *dorp*. Tomorrow, he knew, the Pioneers started on their long trek north and he had much to do in order to put into execution the plan he had conceived overnight.

Just beyond the camp he almost stumbled over a man who was sitting in the mud, gravely apologizing to an ant-hill against which he had stubbed his toe.

The man was Forbes and he was very drunk.

Suppressing a cry of rage, the Runt swiftly went through the drunken man's pockets, Forbes very good-naturedly assisting him and expressing regret that he had so little. His pockets were empty and the Runt, who had hoped to take back the sovereign Forbes had swindled from him several days earlier, snorted in disgust.

After a moment's thought, the Runt took Forbes's hat and revolver and cartridge-belt, then hastened away.

He did not show up at the camp that day. The men missed him and wondered, casually, of his whereabouts. Soon he passed from their thoughts, and, when they broke camp the following morning, they had entirely forgotten him.

Some twenty days later the Pioneers reached the Macloutsie River, the first and easiest stage of their journey completed. The trekking had been slow, for they were forced to adopt their pace to that of the sixteen trek oxen which drew each cumbersome wagon.

At Macloutsie they were joined by a troop of the Charter Company's police and there they made camp; for, before going any further, the authorities planned to put them through a severe training that they might be prepared to meet any emergency. Lions roared about the camp all that first night; and the next morning the Runt, looking very thin and riding a razor-backed mule, rode into the camp of the Bachuanaland Border Police, several miles down the river from the Pioneer's camp.

In answer to inquiries, the Runt said that he had been on a prospecting trip some distance to the west, had lost all his provisions and pack mules and was now on his way to Mafeking to outfit. He had heard nothing about the Pioneers, he said, and was only vaguely interested in what the men of the Border Police had to say about the expedition. He asked permission to stay a few days at the camp and recuperate. When he volunteered to act as cook, the permission was readily granted.

The last day of the Pioneer's stay at Macloutsie, they staged a sham fight, thus proving to the authorities that they were at last ready for the great trek north. The

Runt watched the fight from a distance and the next day watched the ponderous column move off.

As soon as the last wagon was out of sight the Runt returned to the camp of the Border Police and announced that he was going to trek for Mafeking right away. They loaded him with provisions, gave him a rifle and ammunition, loaned him a pack mule and told him to be sure to pay them a visit on his return. They had come to like the little man during his two weeks stay with them.

THE Pioneer column forged slowly ahead. Each day differed from its predecessors only in the degree of hardships to be surmounted. The thirty-six wagons were heavily loaded with ammunition, grain for the horses, provisions and such other stores as were necessary for feeding and caring for the force for many months.

At night a laager was formed, the wagons placed so as to make a hollow square. Outside the square the oxen were tethered to the trek-chains, thus forming a first defensive barrier against a possible attack from the Matabele, whose object was always to get at close quarters with their stabbing assegais.

At two corners of the laager, diagonally opposite, a seven-pounder field-gun was placed. The other two corners were commanded by Maxims. The horses were tethered inside the laager.

A certain number of men was appointed to each wagon, to sleep under it at night and form its escort by day; and, as each wagon had a fixed position in the laager, it was a comparatively easy task to form up—provided the ground was clear and no warriors were at hand to attack.

When the column was on the march, scouts were thrown out in all directions to forestall any surprise attack which would have meant the end of the expedition.

So the column pushed on, hourly expecting to be attacked by the Matabele; it was known that Lobenguella regretted the granting of the concession. Every hardship and discomfort the veld knows they experienced, forced to make a road for themselves, cutting down trees and thick bush, blasting enormous boulders, filling in the muddy bottoms of dongas. It was hard work from reveille to the "last post." To add to their troubles, the native laborers supplied by King Khama of the Bechuanas, deserted in fear of the Matabele; horses died from a mysterious disease and the oxen, showing the strain of the heavy going, were unable to pull their loads. In many places the men were obliged to put their shoulders to the yokes and pull with the oxen.

Fever was rampant; the water supply was a constant problem. Several times armed warriors were observed watching the movements of the column and the laager was formed in the belief that the long expected attack was imminent. Lions, hyenas and packs of wild dogs hovered on the flank of the column, making it impossible to let out the oxen to graze unless under a strong guard. Death was everywhere.

On the fifteenth night of the trek some of the deserting natives returned in great fear, reporting that an army of two thousand Matabele was preparing to attack the laager before morning. Great excitement followed this report. Mines were laid around the camp and the Pioneers cut fodder for the oxen by the light of the searchlight.

Soon every possible precaution was taken and the men waited anxiously for the attack. The searchlight was played continually on the veld about the laager.

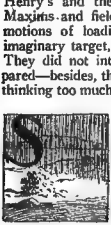
Eagerly the men followed the swinging beam of light, endeavoring to pick out the brave and cunning enemy they thought to be creeping up on them. Each watcher wished that he had the maneuvering of the searchlight to that he could play it just a moment longer on that clump of Mapani, on that jumble of rock. Under such conditions, flickering shadows became warriors and false alarms were frequent.

The searchlight continued to flash back and forth over the veld—now to the south, now to the north; to the east and to the west. In the brilliant white light the veld seemed stark, naked and unreal. Nothing seemed to live in it. The rocks and trees seemed to lack depth, to be impressionistic sketches in black and white. But beyond the beam lay an intense mysterious darkness, a darkness which menaced.

Once the searchlight picked up and threw into strong relief two full grown lions. They stared uneasily before them as if trying to trace the light to its source; then they crawled away, bellies down in the dust like licked curs. The men laughed. A moment later the beam passed on and the men fingered their rifles nervously, wishing that they had shot the beasts when the chance offered. Now the lions were again part

of the darkness of the bush, part of its mystery and not the least of its perils.

The night wore on and the attack did not materialize, neither was there any evidence of a force near at hand. Still the nervous tension did not lessen; the Pioneers kept a tight grip on their Martini-Henry's and the men in charge of the Maxims and field-guns went through the motions of loading, taking aim at some imaginary target, firing and loading again. They did not intend to be caught unprepared—besides, the activity kept them from thinking too much of what might happen.



SUDDENLY one of the men yelled out:

"See, there's something there—close to that clump of bush."

"Don't fire," one of the officers ordered. "It's a white man, I think."

The light remained stationary, focussed on the object indicated by the excited Pioneer.

"It's only a rock," scoffed one. As they spoke, the "rock" moved slowly forward, travelling up the path of light.

Presently they all saw that it was a man, crawling on hands and knees, very, very slowly; and it was a white man.

"Shall we go and fetch him in, sir?" a man cried. "He looks as if he's all in."

"No!" It was Captain Heany speaking. "Not a man leaves the laager. That chap out there may be on the square and need help. On the other hand he may be a white kaffir, be playing possum in order to get some of us out of the laager so that his black friends can have a pot at us."

"Captain Heany's right," echoed Major Johnson, the commanding officer of the expedition. "Keep your eyes peeled, men."

The crawling man came nearer and nearer. Several times he collapsed and lay motionless on the veld. When within fifty yards of the laager, he rose to his feet and ran with tottering steps, his hands outstretched before him.

"My God!" yelled Frostley. "It's the Runt." He ran out to meet the little man, followed closely by Captain Heany. They reached the Runt just as he collapsed entirely; picking him up they carried him into the laager.

Someone brought whisky and poured it down his throat, a spoonful at a time, and presently the Runt sat up and grinned at the little knot of men standing about him.

"I thought I was done for that time," he gasped. "I nearly trod on a lion's tail." Then he swayed and would have fallen had not Father Burbage, a Jesuit missionary with the expedition, supported him in his strong arms.

"He needs sleep and food," said the padre in answer to inquiring looks. "First sleep." He carried the Runt to one of the wagons and made him as comfortable as possible.

The Runt slept, but his sleep was disturbed by fearful nightmares. Several times he sat bolt upright with a yell of alarm, his eyes wide-open, staring fixedly, seeing nothing save the phantoms conjured up by his subconscious memory of his adventures and loneliness since leaving Macloutsie. Continually he talked of his wanderings.

Each time the Padre talked soothingly to him and, with a gentle pressure on his chest, forced him to lie down again.

Just before daybreak, sleep got complete hold of the Runt; the nervous twitching stopped, his muscles relaxed and, turning over on his side, he slept peacefully. The padre rose and joined the officers.

"How's the Runt, Padre?" Heany asked.

"He's all right now. He'll sleep a long time and wake up yelling for food. Do you know that dear fool's been following us since we left Mafeking? And he's green at that. Didn't know how to hobble his mules and one broke away the second day out from Macloutsie. The little man had to walk after that. Four days ago a lion killed his other mule and he was obliged to leave his scanty provisions behind. Can you imagine that? He's been eating food we left behind. He threw away his rifle and ammunition because they were too heavy.

"Can you picture him? Sleeping up trees at night—hiding from our scouts and the Matabele—scared to death all of the time. I wish I could tell you all the things he's been saying in his sleep; it's an epic. But what's the motive back of it all?"

"He wanted to be a Pioneer, Padre, so that he can have a farm."

"Ah. I see. That explains the words "three thousand acres" he kept saying over and over again."

"But why didn't he join us sooner?" asked Major Johnson.

"Because he was afraid you'd send him back."

"And he got to the end of his tether tonight, eh, Padre? Couldn't hold out any longer, is that it?"

"The marvel is that he held out as long as he did," the priest concluded. "I must go back to him now. I don't want him to be alone should he wake."

As the padre walked away Heany turned to his superior.

"Will you sign him on, Major? The plucky little devil deserves it," he said.

"I don't see how I can, Heany. I haven't the authority to do that. Of course he'll have to come along with us and take a chance on what'll happen when we get through. He'll be taken care of somehow, but I'm afraid he's not eligible for a farm and, for the matter of that, I don't see any reason for stretching a point in his favor. He's not likely to be of any use to us."

With that Heany had to be content.

WHEN morning came and the long-expected attack had not developed, the scouts were sent out. They reported that no warriors were in the vicinity, and the oxen were inspanned and the Pioneers were on the march again.

The Runt still slept. Not until the column halted again and made laager that night, did he awaken. Then Father Burbage brought him a steaming bowl of buck-soup and made him eat it slowly, refusing to let the little man talk, chasing away such Pioneers as sought to crowd around and ask questions.

"That's great," the Runt exclaimed when, his hunger satisfied, he pushed the bowl away from him. "I'd 'a' come in sooner had I known you'd feed me like this."

Father Burbage smiled.

"You've had a hard time—yes?"

The little man's eyes clouded; a haunting look of fear came into them.

"Lions," he said as if to himself. "Lions—and niggers—and snakes—and—ugh!" He shook himself as one awakening from an unpleasant dream.

"But that's all over now," Father Burbage said softly. "You are with the Pioneers and safe."

The Runt grinned.

"I *am* a Pioneer and——"

The padre shook his head.

"Not so fast."

"What do you mean? They ain't goin' to send me back, are they? Not all that way alone? Besides——"

His voice trailed off; he watched the Padre's face anxiously.

"No. They won't do that, but—well, do you feel all right now? Because if you do I'm going to take you to Major Johnson."

"I'm all right," the Runt said slowly, rising unsteadily to his feet, "but I ain't agoin' to see him lookin' like this."

He glanced disparagingly at his clothes. They were soiled and torn, barely hanging together, his shoes were uppers only, the soles worn completely through. He was filthily dirty, but, save for a certain strained expression in his face, the deep lines about his eyes, he looked exceedingly fit.

"That's all right," the padre said cheerfully. "None of us look any too spruce. We'll see Major Johnson first, and get that over with. We'll outfit you afterward. Come on."

A few minutes later the Runt was facing Major Johnson—alone.

"Well," began the officer bluntly, "you're a hell of a man, aren't you? What's your little game, anyway?" Then, before the Runt could stammer an explanation, he continued swiftly, "I don't know why you're alive—maybe because the Matabele thought you weren't worth killing. And now you've loaded yourself on us and we have to take care of you, as if we hadn't enough to worry about. That's what you planned on, isn't it—for us to take care of you? All right! We'll take care of you, Feed you and give you some clothes to wear, but, you've got to work blasted hard for what you get. You'll be with the road-cutting detachment all the time. That's all."

"Yes, sir! Very good, sir!" The Runt's eyes were shining with happiness. "You mean I'm a regular Pioneer, don't you? I'll get a farm just like the others?"

"Hell, no! You've been a sailor, I hear Well, then, did you ever hear of a stowaway sharing in salvage money? That's what you are—a stowaway."

"But, sir——"

"There's no 'but' to it. Report to Sergeant Hough in the morning."

The Runt saluted awkwardly, and walked dejectedly away.

FOLLOWED a period of never-ending toil for the Runt. Every morning, long before the laager was broken up and the column on trek, he was off with the road-makers.

All day long, day after day, he worked under the blazing sun, moving boulders,

chopping down thorn-bush, filling in mud-holes. It was tiring, back-breaking work, but the Runt never whined, never attempted to shirk. When some of the men announced their intention of asking Major Johnson to give him a rest, the Runt pleaded with them not to interfere.

"I'm a bloomin' stowaway," he said. "The Major's treating me right."

Actually he seemed to thrive on the hard labor. He had the real pioneer spirit and he gloried in his task. He saw more to it than "just making a road." He had the vision to see that he was helping to create a country.

When the day's toil was over and the men sat about the campfires talking of their plans, of what they would do with the wealth their gold claims would bring them, none seemed to be interested in the three thousand acre farms, save for the gold which might be on them. The Runt would listen in miserable silence for a little while and then retire to his blankets and sleep.

After he had left them, the men would talk of him, wondering how they could lighten his lot. After many days a deputation of five—among them Forbes, the man with whom the Runt had fought at Mafeking, and Frostley—put the matter up to Captain Heany. Captain Heany, with the padre as reserve, put the matter up to Major Johnson.

The next night the padre asked the Runt to go for a walk with him.

"I can't sleep," he said "with this bright moon shining. I want to have a talk with you."

The expedition was nearing the end of its long trek and the men were building castles in the air even more enthusiastically than usual; the Runt welcomed the opportunity to get away from this exquisite torture. Still he demurred.

"It ain't safe, is it, sir?" he asked. "We ain't allowed to go outside the laager at night."

Father Burbage laughed reassuringly.

"We won't go far," he said. "Only to that tree." He pointed to a large baobab tree about three hundred yards from the laager. "It's safe enough! This is not lion country and our scouts report the district clear of Matabele. We wouldn't have bothered to make laager tonight only it's got to be almost a habit. You forget we're over the border. We're in Mashonaland now. Major Johnson is so sure that all danger from attack has passed that he's only posted a few sentries—and they're playing cards.

"All right, Padre," the Runt agreed hastily. But let me get a rifle and cartridges first."

He darted away and, after a few minutes heated conversation with Frostley and several others, returned empty-handed.

"They won't let me have a gun," he said bitterly.

"Never mind; you'd have no use for it. Come along."

They left the laager and walked silently over the moonlit veld in the direction of the baobab. Each was strangely affected by the beauty of the night and the unreal, magical atmosphere produced by the blue-white light of the moon.

The padre walked with hands clasped behind his back, looking straight ahead of him, noting the landscape only subconsciously. His thoughts were a long way from Africa.

The Runt's eyes were everywhere; his head turned constantly to the right and to the left. He sought to penetrate the dark shadows which marked the depressions in the rolling veld; his imagination peopled them with lurking perils. He saw snakes where there were only dried twigs; fear, born of his experiences, transformed every rock into a crouching lion.

They reached the baobab-tree and seated themselves on the rocks piled about its massive trunk. Then the Padre, remembered that he was not alone, that he had something of importance to say to the little man who sat so silently beside him.

"You know, Runt, Major Johnson is very pleased with you," he said suddenly.

"Yes, sir?" the Runt said absently. He was squinting hard at a clump of elephant grass a little to the left of them.

"Yes!" the padre echoed warmly, yet wondering that the Runt showed such little interest. "Very pleased indeed. Major Johnson told me to tell you that. Of course you can't be expected to be treated as a regularly enrolled Pioneer; you won't get the farm or the gold claims, you know, but he's going to take you off the road-making detachment tomorrow and he is going to put you on the pay-sheets. So, you see, you'll have quite a nice little sum coming to you by the time——"

"Never mind that," the Runt interrupted, and his voice was tense, quavered slightly. "Now look—but don't look as if you're lookin'—at that rock, that one just on the edge of that elephant grass patch. See it?"

"Yes," the padre said wonderingly, "but——"

"Look hard," the Runt urged. "Don't

stand up, and don't let on what you see."

The padre, still mystified, obeyed the Runt's earnest command.

"It's—I saw it move," he said quietly. "It's a Matabele."

"Yes," the Runt whispered, "and the bloomin' veld's covered with them. See: over there near that—oh, never mind lookin', they're there, I tell you, an' they're headin' for the laager. Give us a match."

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a smoke. Want to think. Don't want them to know we've spotted them."

He lighted his pipe with the match the padre handed him and puffed vigorously.

"Look here," he said presently. "You know what'll happen if we don't get word to the chaps at the laager? These blacks 'll get up close and wipe 'em out. Ain't got a revolver, have you?"

"No."

"No. Of course you wouldn't have. So we can't signal them."

"We can shout," the padre said hopefully.

He was looking casually about him as he spoke. The warrior by the elephant grass had disappeared, but he saw others and guessed at the presence of many more, strung out in a long, curving line, black shadows of black Africa, all crawling on their bellies, slowly, terribly, toward the laager. Once he saw the glimmer of an assegai head and hoped that one of the sentries had looked up from his card-playing at that moment. The next moment the glimmer disappeared; only a shadow remained.

"We can shout," he repeated.

"No!" the Runt objected violently. "In the first place they wouldn't hear us, the wind's against us. In the second place we'd be giving ourselves away to the niggers. As long as they think we haven't seen 'em, they'll leave us alone, maybe. They don't know we ain't got no guns."

"But we mustn't waste time here," the padre said impatiently. "How about starting a fire?"

"With the grass all wet with dew," the Runt said scornfully.

The Padre felt helpless to meet the emergency, was acutely conscious of it and was willing to put himself under the Runt's command.

"At least we can make a break for it and run for the laager. Perhaps we'd get there in time——"

"No. That's no good. They'd stick us with an assegai as soon as we started anything like that. At any rate they'd sneak up quick behind us and get in their dirty work before our chaps had time to get to their posts."

"At least we could get close enough to shout a warning."

"No! We wouldn't get far. You can bet your life they've tolled off some of their gang to watch us. As soon as we show we know they're there by leaving here, they'll do us in. Until then we're safe; and they're getting nearer to the laager all the time."

"You're right," the padre said despondently. "This unnerves me. To die, that is our privilige; but to know we can do nothing for the others——"

"Who said we couldn't do nothing? We can, but we got to do it quick, afore they get between us and the laager. Listen. We're going to talk angry to each other—talk real loud, too, and then we're going to stand up, still arguing loud. Then we'll spar a minute and you'll knock me down."

"But why——"

"Wait a minute," the Runt said angrily, raising his voice. "And then you'll kick me and walk back to the laager, casual like. If we do it right, they won't suspect anything. Go on, say something, Padre. Ain't got much time."

"Why can't we both go?" The padre had raised his voice, and there was anger in his too.

"Because, you fool—I didn't mean that, Padre," the Runt shouted, "they'd be suspicious."

"All right! You go—I'll stay."

"No. It 'ud look fine, wouldn't it, a little runt like me knocking a big ox like you down. And it was my plan. What I say goes."

"What will happen to you, Runt?" the padre asked softly.

"Shout angry-like, I tell you," the Runt said irritably. "Me? I'll get in all right. As soon as I see the searchlight going, I'll run like hell. They won't catch me." The Runt rose to his feet. "Get up now, Padre."

HE Padre rose and the Runt danced round him, his fists going in and out.

"Lucky we've got clear ground," he snorted. "They can't get too close without us seein' 'em. Keep your eyes peeled just the same. Fight, Padre."

"You're a good man, Runt," the Padre

said softly, pivoting slowly to face the Runt's mock attack.

"Fight, Padre. Damn it, fight, man!" the Runt almost screamed. "Aim for my jaw, now, with all your strength. Make it look real."

"*Dominus vobiscum*," said the padre, and aimed a powerful blow for the Runt's jaw.

There was a loud *smack* as the padre's fist struck the Runt's open palm and the little man, going away from the blow, was unhurt but fell to the ground in a heap.

The padre leaned over him, afraid that his blow had gone home, shook him slightly and was rewarded with a snarl.

"Get out. Get to the laager," the Runt ordered.

The padre pressed his hand, then, straightening, kicked viciously at the Runt's body. There was a hollow groan from the Runt, but the Padre's eyes filled with tears; the outcropping of rock, near the Runt, which he had kicked, was very hard.

Then he walked back toward the laager, traveling much faster than his slouching gait would indicate.

Presently the Runt rose to his feet and shook his fist at the retreating figure. Then he limped over to the rocks and sat down, resting his head in his hands, a picture of dejection.

But his every faculty was alert. He was conscious of noise, of movement, on the veld all about him.

He saw that the line of black shadows had advanced considerably. They were now between him and the laager, but the padre was ahead of them. He had left just in time.

The Runt marveled at the priest's self-control.

"If that was me," he muttered, "I'd be runnin' like hell. An' he's strolling along there so easy like, as if he was—" the Runt had to think hard for a metaphor, and found it in his sea experience—"taking dog-watch in a dead calm. Look at him now, stooping down; tying his shoe lace, I suppose. He hadn't ought to have done that. Yes, he had though. He was almost on top of that nigger. I hadn't spotted that one. Hope there ain't any more around near——"

The Runt suddenly remembered himself and was momentarily panic-stricken. He wanted to jump up and run—to cry aloud.

Beads of sweat dripped from his chin; his hands were cold and clamy. By sheer will-power he fought down the impulse to run. He must stay until the padre was safe inside the laager. He would not have long to wait now, and then—what?

He would die, that was sure, he thought. He couldn't hope to get through. As soon as the black shadows knew that their little game was up they would cease to be shadows; they'd be murderous devils and all the assegais they had meant for the men in the laager would be buried in his body. Ah, well, if he couldn't have a farm, what was the use. He'd wait where he was and take what was coming.

The padre was close to the laager now; he had reached it. The Runt could see him no more; he was inside.

The Runt rose unsteadily to his feet and moved away from the rocks. There was a rustling in the grass patch, men whispering. The Runt quickened his pace.

Why didn't something happen? The padre was too long-winded; he was——

The clear notes of a bugle sounded over the veld, and almost simultaneously the rat-a-tat of the Maxims, the rattle of rifle-fire disturbed the night's silence, and the searchlight swept back and forth over the veld, making new shadows, exposing the creeping ones. Suddenly the veld was carpeted by black warriors, leaping to their feet, rushing to the attack.

A fierce yell sounded behind the Runt. An assegai whizzed by his ear. His walk became a run.

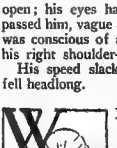
He did not turn his head, he did not dare to, and so did not know that the warrior who had thrown the assegai was now running in the opposite direction. He thought death was hard at his heels.

He did not realize that the black warriors attacking the laager had retreated, after their first mad charge, and were now running toward him with fear-driven speed.

The effect of that charge was to dot the veld with shadows that would not move again.

The Runt was running with mouth wide-open; his eyes half-closed. Black forms passed him, vague and indistinct. Then he was conscious of a sharp burning pain in his right shoulder—another in his thigh.

His speed slackened; he stumbled and fell headlong.



WHEN he came to he looked up into the padre's kindly face.

"All right," he said. "I'll go. But I'll get a gun first. It ain't safe." Then he remembered; saw that he was in one of the wagons, was undressed and lying

on a camp-cot between white linen sheets! There was a smell of iodoform in the air. It reminded the Runt of a ship's galley and he felt suddenly seasick.

"What happened, sir?" he asked.

"It's all over, my boy," the padre said. "We beat them off—thanks to you. You, and three oxen, are our only casualties. The oxen are dead, but we'll have you on your feet in a day or two. Just flesh wounds, that's all."

The Runt was silent for a moment.

"I'm hungry," he said, then.

The padre smiled.

"I'll go and order a big meal cooked for you. Can you wait ten minutes?"

"Sure," said the Runt.

As the padre climbed down from the wagon, the Runt closed his eyes; wondering why he was being treated so well, wishing the dull aches in shoulder and thigh would stop.

He was conscious presently that someone was standing near him and, opening his eyes, he saw Major Johnson and Captain Heany.

The major had two legal looking documents in his hand; Captain Heany was holding pen and ink.

"Can you write, Morton?" the senior officer asked gruffly.

"Yes, sir."

"Then sign these—here—on the dotted lines. One for you; one for us."

He gave the papers to the Runt, who took them with shaking hand.

"What are they, sir?" he asked.

"That is the regular contract all Pioneers have to sign."

"You mean I'm to be a regular Pioneer, sir, and—and—have a farm?"

"Damn it, yes, man. Every man in the force wants to make over his farm grant to you. Sign that, now. Don't talk. The padre said he'd skin me alive if I bothered you tonight."

The Runt took the pen from Captain Heany and slowly, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth, signed his name on the dotted line at the bottom of the two papers.

"Hercules Morton," he wrote in big, bold letters, and the two men watching him did not smile. One copy he gave back to the Major, his eyes shining with excitement.

"Tomorrow, the men—" began Major Johnson.

He stopped as Captain Heany whispered something in his ear, something that had to do with the padre's threat, and both tiptoed quickly away.

When the padre returned five minutes later with a steak cut from one of the oxen killed during the attack, the Runt was fast asleep.

Bending over him, the padre saw he had a paper in his hand. He tried gently to remove it, but the Runt's hold was firm.

"Three thousand acres," the little man was talking in his sleep. "God! Ain't that wonderful!"

THE "MEXICAN" KICKAPOOS

IN THE wild mountains of northern Mexico, not far from Nacimiento, is a primitive settlement of middle-western Algonquin Indians, who to this day keep up the ancient life and ceremonies of their ancestors, although far away from their former homes. The main body of these Indians is composed of members of the Kickapoo tribe, although there is a considerable number of Potawatomi of the prairie among them. Their original lands were in Indiana and Illinois, and they were noted for the part that they played in border warfare when these states were first opened for settlement. Because of their hatred of the white man and his ways, they fled to Mexico where they might dwell in peace and be aloof from the inquisitive "Long Knives."

Naturally visitors are not unduly welcome in their midst, but, if a white man with some knowledge of Indian ways and customs goes to them in a friendly spirit, he will be well received, and at least one of the younger ethnologists has made the trip in safety. However, it is a man's job to reach them through a bandit infested country. Not one of the least dangers being the negotiation of a safe passage through a district inhabited by renegade Creek negro freedmen, who are said to be extremely dangerous to weak or unarmed parties.

The Mexican Kickapoos still hunt deer with the bow and arrow to a great extent, and kill bears in hand to hand contests, armed only with spear and knife. Rifles and cartridges are too expensive and difficult to obtain to be used for anything short of great emergencies. They kill enough game, however, to supply most of the Oklahoma Indians of various tribes with excellent Indian tanned buckskin.—A. S.

A PAIR OF TAN SHOES

By MAGRUDER G. MAURY
Author of "The Silver Saint of Baliuag"

A grim trail they trod, deep into the Moro stronghold of Mindanao, but Greg Smiles was mighty fond of those shoes—and, besides, the substitute pair hurt his feet

OUT beyond the frontier of the Western world, where purple seas croon and storm at coral beaches of verdurous isles, strange things are likely to happen.

Not that that thought was in the mind of Gregory Smiles, first mate of the pigeon-breasted tramp steamer *Potomac*, loading sugar at Baiumbong, Mindanao. With nothing at all to do, and ten long days to do it in, he lounged in a deck chair and stared somnolently at a stream of half naked brown bodies passing and repassing each other on the gangplank, Filipinos bearing bags of sugar into the ship and returning to the wharf for more sugar, like a stream of brown ants.

The bright, hot day was almost over. In a little while the sun would go tumbling down behind the mountains and the tropic night would shut them in.

A hand on his shoulder roused him.

"Wake up, you seven-day sleeper!" the voice of Hy Hays, the second mate, called. "If we're going to hear any of the concert we'd better get ashore."

Greg—nobody ever called him anything else—arose, yawned, stretched himself and followed his old crony down the ladder to the smelly well-deck, mingled with the descending sugar-loaders on the gangway and passed on to the broad, dusty road that separated the rows of nipa-thatched bamboo houses of the market-place.

At the end of the market was the pygmy plaza of Baiumbong. There twice a week, consecutively, the regimental band of the Americans held forth for an hour or two in the early evening, while the foreigners in the village strolled about disconsolately, trying to imagine themselves walking on the gay Escolta in Manila.

Midway between the wharf and the plaza a tall Moro, wearing skin-tight scarlet trousers and a purple plush jacket, but bareheaded and barefooted, collided with the first mate.

Greg did not like being butted into. He stepped aside with a muttered expletive and was about to pass on when a greedy look in the Moro's narrow, wicked eyes drew his attention. The native, catching the white man's eye, gesticulated toward the vivid tan shoes with which the first mate had proudly set off his attire when he was getting ready for his evening ashore.

"*'Sta muy hermosa!*" said the Moro, between betel-blackened stubs of teeth.

"Yeah," agreed Greg, "very pretty," and he tried to walk on.

But the Filipino was in front of him.

"*Quanto vale?*" he demanded, pointing to the shoes.

"I ain't sellin' 'em," snapped the American.

"*Dos pesos!*" persisted the native.

"Get away, you pest!" Greg snorted, hurrying to overtake Hays, who was attempting to wigwag a remarkably pretty *mestiza* girl.

The girl, chewing betel-nut, spat a copious red stream into the dusty road, and smiled charmingly at Greg, with an upward, admiring glance from his tan shoes.

The plaza was quite well filled with the few Americans of the town, the Dutch consul, his fat children and fatter wife, the Spanish representative, olive-drab and very thin, and the natives and halfbreeds. Greg and Hays amused themselves by following the little *mestiza* maiden about, to her huge delight and the intense indignation of her fat, dark-skinned mother, who glared at the two Americans between puffs at her ragged and immense cheroot.

When the last notes of the "Star Spangled Banner" had died short and echoless on the sultry air, the last ray of daylight had faded, leaving the little plaza lighted only by oil lamps set on the tops of tall poles around the place. In this semi-gloom the crowd milled and circled, the two mates from the *Potomac* in the thick of it.

Under one of the lamps they again encountered the man who had wanted to buy Greg's shoes. He still coveted them.

"You sell me *sabatos*, eh?" he implored, in his half English. "*Cinco pesos?*"

"You're drunk," said Greg. "*Muy barracho.* Move on!"

The crowd began to clear out, for, though the Filipino, like most semi-civilized Orientals, can sleep at any or all hours of the twenty-four, he likes to get under cover early. The plaza was almost empty before the two sailors started back for their ship.

They found the market-place deserted and dark, and hurried through, Greg with the feeling that they were being followed. When they were less than a hundred yards from the shore end of the gangplank leading up the *Potomac's* dirty sides, two men stepped out from behind the last of the shacks. A familiar voice lifted itself to Greg's ears.

"Señor, you *vende me sabatos*, eh?"

"You've got an awful crust!" exploded the owner and wearer of the coveted tan shoes.

"Better do what he says, Greg," advised the other seaman. "He may have a flock of his *compadres* with him. Let him have the shoes."

"No!" shouted Greg.

At the word he felt a crushing blow on his shoulder that knocked him reeling against Hays. Before he could recover his footing, another wallop laid him on the ground.

When he came to he was stripped to his underclothes and socks. His beautiful yellow shoes were gone, and with them the blue serge suit he had bought in Glasgow and the Panama hat he'd got in Blue Fields, Nicaragua. Out of the dark there flowed to him a steady stream of profanity. He listened, admiringly. It came from Hy Hays.

"See what your bullet head's got us into!" sputtered the second mate, heaving himself into blurred view from a puddle beneath the butcher's shack. "Why didn't you have sense enough to sell them damn yellow submarines for the five bucks the Spiggotty wanted to give you? He got 'em anyway, did'nt he? He took everything I had off'n me but my socks."

"Me, too," grunted Greg, standing up and tenderly fingering the bruises on his shoulder and head where he had been struck with a bamboo pole.

With Hays still spilling curses on everything in Baiumbung, but most of all on the first mate, the pair of them made their way to the side of the ship and into their cabin. There they stared at each other by the electric bulb.

Only a pair of swimming trunks which he wore in lieu of a lower undergarment, and the socks he had mentioned, had been left to Hy Hays.

Greg got one good look at his shipmate and burst into uproarious laughter. He laughed till Hays threatened to throttle him.

"Take a look at yourself if you think I'm so funny," the second mate advised.

Greg roared some more.

His shouts aroused the chief engineer, who came lumbering in from his bunk under the lifeboat to be let in on the joke. By morning the story was all over the ship, and by noon all over town. When night came again Hays, still sulky, retired to his cabin and read an ancient magazine.

But Greg borrowed what clothes he could and, with the first assistant engineer, went ashore to hear the band play.

GRINS, friendly or malicious, according to the disposition of the grinner, greeted him as he went into the little plaza. He affected to ignore them all until Lieutenant McCarthy, commander of the constabulary, slapped

him on the back and mentioned that he observed Greg was wearing black shoes instead of tan.

"If you were half the policeman you think you are you'd have had those shoes back for me by this time," Greg retorted. "If I ever get 'em back I'll have to do it myself."

By this time the three men were standing close under the bandstand. Above the blaring of the band and the chatter in the plaza, came a wailing and an outburst of native curses.

Through the jammed press of bodies went McCarthy, his broad shoulders and bulk as much as his badge of office parting the crowd as the bows of a steamer parts the waves. Greg and the first assistant engineer from the *Potomac* were close behind the police officer. Under a mango tree, heavy with ripening fruit, they discovered the cause of the rumpus. A woman, blood-stained, her camiseta almost torn from her back, was wailing and jabbering to a listening crowd of her neighbors.

McCarthy jerked out an order, and the woman ceased crying. He spoke again, and she resumed her tale. When she had finished, the police officer turned to the seamen.

"You know that pretty *mestiza* you and Hays were following around last night, Greg? Well, she's been kidnapped. And her father, old Sylvanos Lomitay, has been cut down with campilans, and is dead in his own hut. This woman saw some of it, and the kidnappers beat her up, as you see."

"What are you going to do?" asked Greg.

"Get 'em," said McCarthy, laconically.

He strode off toward the constabulary barracks. At the end of a dozen yards or so he turned to Greg.

"What are you tailing me for?" he said, gruffly.

"Now, don't get huffy," said Greg, pleasantly. "You'll need a good tracker and dick along with you. That's me. I'm goin' along."

"You're crazy," objected the officer. "You can't keep up with my men."

"Huh! If such a fat, ungainly lump as you can lead 'em I can draw rings around 'em."

McCarthy surveyed him shrewdly, snorted, and said no more.

"Go on back to the ship, Bill," Greg ordered the first assistant engineer, who had followed at a halting distance. "Tell the captain I've gone to uphold the law of the land and punish a hidjus crime. I'll be back long before they get those twenty-nine thousand bags of sugar aboard."

Bill was Scotch. It took some time for an idea to force its way through his Edinburgh skull, though once it had found a lodgment he received it gladly. By the time he was sure of what the first mate meant to do that young man had left him and had caught up with McCarthy.

At the head of a dozen lean constables armed with wicked-looking carbines and carrying campilans strapped unofficially to their belts, McCarthy and Greg started for the house where the murder had been committed.

It lay a mile out of the town, on the beach, where the lapping waves washed clean the sand beneath its open floor. It had a deserted look when the police arrived. The Filipino does not like to come into contact with the constabulary, especially after a killing.

With a powerful flashlight McCarthy went over the ground. Then, followed by the sailor, he climbed the bamboo ladder and entered the hut.

"The devils!" he muttered, looking down at the mutilated, bleeding body of the murdered man. "He was sitting here waiting for his chow when they came. See the rice bowls and the *baccalao* all ready? He probably asked them to sit down and join him in a bit o' grub. And then they jumped him." McCarthy grunted. He had been seven years in the constabulary and few of the twists and quirks of the Malay mind were hidden from him.

"What's the name o' that gink that robbed me last night?" asked Greg.

"Hinobayan Manibinalda," said the policeman. "Why?"

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing," said McCarthy, "except that he has rotten taste in footwear."

"I'd like to bet when you catch your murderer and kidnapper you catch friend Hino," growled Greg. "These shoes of Hy Hay's pinch like the devil."

McCarthy merely laughed as he swung down the ladder.

"There's a place up the mountains about three days from here," he told Greg when they had joined the constables. "It's called Umingan, and they have a regular slave market where they swap men and women and children for animals. If we travel fast we may overtake our men and their captives."

"Us for Umingan then," said Greg.

"Lead on, McDuff—I mean, McCarthy."

It was a blistering night under the trees, sweltering, sticky, breathless, but neither McCarthy nor his little brown men seemed to mind the heat or the lack of air. Into the jungle they plunged as a man throws himself into tumbling breakers, and the jungle swallowed them as the sea swallows a swimmer.

Before they had gone a mile Greg shed his coat, hanging it on the limb of a tree.

"Maybe," he told himself, "I'll get it when I come back. If not, I won't be losing anything for it belongs to the chief engineer."

The little column marched single-file, without a word and with but the smallest of sounds. Occasionally from the heavy foliage of the narra and molave branches overhead came the sleepy chatter of monkeys or parrots, disturbed by the alien feet passing beneath them. For the rest, the forest was still, breathless.

By morning they had come to the edge of the heavy timber and were climbing the hills toward the heights.

EXCEPT for brief rests, all that day the hike continued. Long before noon Greg had to admit to himself that McCarthy's warning of the speed at which the little brown constables could march was well founded. By the middle of the afternoon he wished he had minded his own business and stayed with the old *Potomac* with its smell of raw sugar. But when the sun sank behind the mountains, and the column swung into a tiny village street, while the inhabitants stared at them open-mouthed, he began to feel proud of himself for coming.

That night he slept like a drunken man, hardly moving until he was awakened in the morning by the lieutenant in time to drink some tea and swallow a slab of cold rice and a bit of smelly dried fish.

"We're making much better time than I had hoped," announced McCarthy, giving a hitch to his revolver belt, "and one of the men says he knows a short cut from here. We should make the slave market before night. Have you a revolver?"

"Huh? A revolver?" It was the first time Greg had thought of a weapon for himself. "Nope."

"I was a damn fool to let you come on this trip," McCarthy growled. "The *juramentados* are out ahead of us, I've found out here in the village, and you as helpless as a baby. Here, take this."

He handed Greg a pearl-handled revolver and some cartridges.

"It's a spare one," he added. "I took it from a *pandita*, which is a sort of Moslem priest, after he tried to blow my bean off with it."

"What had you done to get him so ruffled and upset?" Greg inquired, as he slipped the weapon into his shirt front.

"Oh, nothing." They were on the hike now, McCarthy leading. He looked back over his shoulder to add: "He was a *juramentado*. That was what spoiled his disposition."

"What's a hoory-whatever-you-call-it?" Greg wanted to know. "That's the second time you've used that word in the last half hour."

"A *juramentado*," said the police officer, didactically, "is a Moslem who believes if he dies while he's killing a Christian he will get a special berth in heaven. Ho, Camobay, *vamos—pronto!*"

All morning they climbed. At noon they came to the foot of a steep, rock-littered pass into the heart of the mountains. The air felt almost chill as it blew out of the half gloom of the ravine.

"Nasty gut, that," pronounced McCarthy, surveying the winding track ahead. He waved Camobay and a couple of other men ahead to act as advance guards and flankers. "If our Moslem friends caught us in there without warning, good-by first mate," he said, cheering Greg on.

For half an hour they marched in silence, keeping in close touch with the advance party, with Greg watching the glowering cliffs above and ahead of them with a wholesome respect. At last they came to a spot where the ravine widened out into a basin perhaps two hundred yards wide, with steeply sloping sides covered with a sort of thorn bush. The rim of the basin was fringed with boulders and scrubby trees.

Midway across the basin Greg saw Camobay toss his carbine to his shoulder and fire. A brown and red figure rose from behind a rock at the cliff's edge, arms stretched heavenward, and came pitching and rolling downward with a rattle of loose stones to the floor of the basin.

Camobay came running back toward McCarthy, and the rest of the constabulary gathered closer about their officer. A boulder seemed to come to life on the edge of the wall above them, poised for a long moment, and then bounded downward. On

its heels came another and another, and then flying stones spun at them from every direction.

McCarthy snapped a shot at the top of the cliff. A native in gaudy red pantaloons and blue jacket spun around like a top and dropped out of sight.

With that bedlam broke loose. A boulder from the cliff struck a rock and split like a bursting shell, scattering singing fragments broadcast. From behind other boulders came a spitting of rifles, the snarl of an ancient Spanish Mauser mingling with the booming of a still more ancient Remington. A bullet spat viciously at Greg's ear. He ducked, involuntarily, and McCarthy grinned.

"Won't help you any to do that," sang out the lieutenant.

He seemed in a good humor, all his anxiety gone now that the fighting had really started. Greg saw him give a swift, all encompassing look around him.

"We've got to get them out of that," McCarthy shouted above the din. "You, Camobay, take those three Manobos and cover us. We're going up that hill. Come on, Greg!"

The little police band was spread out now skirmish fashion, with McCarthy and Greg in the center and advancing at a run. Bullets sang past their ears, and rocks, more menacing than the bullets, came showering down at them in long, awesome leaps and bounds, cutting through the thorn bushes and catapulting into the air again like living things.

Almost before he realized it, Greg was at the foot of the last steep incline.

An evil brown face rose from behind a big gray boulder and hurled a jagged lump of rock at him. The white man dodged and fired. The man behind the boulder screamed and disappeared.

One of the policemen, a little ahead of Greg, suddenly dropped his carbine, fell backward and downward. Greg jumped for the gun, picked it up and joined the last rush of the police.

Followed a period of riotous confusion. Faces appeared and disappeared. Greg emptied his revolver, and broke the stock of the carbine over the red-turbaned head of a brawny *juramentado* who was coming at him, spitting like an infuriated cat and brandishing a wavy-bladed kris.

Then it was over. The gaudy clad natives could be seen running away.

Greg found himself looking down at the broken gun, trying to seem unconcerned and to get his breath at the same time. McCarthy, a trifle rumpled, and with a gash across his cheek-bone, was leaning against a large rock, feeling in his pocket for the makings. His fingers did not tremble when he drew out the tobacco pouch and wheat-straw papers and rolled a cigarette.

"They'll leave us alone now for a while," he said, "but we'll have to travel like Helen Maria if we're going to get to Umingan before they clear out that slave market and take our birds with them back into the hills."

Camobay and the lieutenant examined the one man they had lost. He had been struck flush in the face by a rock and knocked down the cliff. Several of the others were suffering from minor cuts and bruises, but they all lined up with the lieutenant at the bottom of the gorge as though a fight with double their number of fanatic killers was a mere incident in their day's work, as indeed it was.

"Are you going to leave that poor chap unburied?" Greg demanded, as he saw McCarthy about to give the word to start.

"Have to," said the officer. "We can't stop now. On the way back, maybe."

"Give me a man and we'll cover him with rocks anyhow," protested Greg.

"You're a sentimental fool," growled McCarthy, "but go ahead. Take Camobay, and follow us as soon as you can."

THE little column moved off, leaving Greg and Camobay selecting and gathering stones. For twenty minues or so they worked hard. By that time they had a closely fitted mound of stones, a rude monument to the gritty little police fighter who would fight no more. They left him, and climbed the cliff.

Then, Camobay ahead to lead the way, Greg carrying his revolver in his hand, they started on a long, easy trot up the incline and came suddenly to where the gorge stopped and the ground dropped away toward a little valley.

"Umingan!" ejaculated Camobay, pointing downward.

"Uh!" grunted Greg, for he could see no sign of a town in the jungle below them, nor was there any hint of McCarthy and his men. "Where the dickens have the lieutenant and his gang got to?"

"Maybeso go other way," said Camobay. "You come me."

There was nothing else for it. Greg fol-

lowed the native, who was striking as straight as possible for the valley below.

The path over which they were traveling was soft, almost muddy. Greg, looking down, saw the imprint of bare feet, and among them, partially overlaid by the track of spreading bare toes and long heels, the broad track of a square-toed, thick-soled shoe.

"I knew it," he crowed, triumphantly. "My shoes—my new tan shoes! I'd know those tracks if I saw 'em on the Biera del Mar or on Fifth Avenue. Hi, Camobay!"

The little brown police officer turned his head, but not his toes.

"Here. Come. *Approshay*. Viennese. *Wikiwiki!*" Greg made come-hither signs violently with every word.

Reluctantly Camobay retraced his steps. Greg pointed with tragic emphasis at the marks of the shoe soles.

"Hinobayan!" he ejaculated. "I knew all along the geezer that stole my shoes was the one that stole the girl and murdered her daddy."

Camobay straightened up from his examination of the shoe-prints.

"*Si*, señor," he agreed. "Hinobayan."

They resumed their trotting tumble down the hill and soon came to the gentle slope of the valley, where the trees gave way to bamboo spurs and thickets and the rice paddies surrounding the village began. Another quarter of a mile and they found themselves at Umingan.

Even from where they stood they could see that the little town was in a ferment. Men were running about the market-place, and the long community house fairly seethed with brown women, tumbling babies, squealing pigs, and cackling hens.

At the farther end of the market-place was the slave mart, shut off from view by a bamboo stockade. Greg knew it for what it was because he saw his yellow shoes at the gate, with Hinobayan in them, waving his arms and talking.

"Now where the devil is McCarthy?" Greg grumbled. "If he don't get here in a minute he's going to miss the lot. Damn the luck. He calls himself a police officer, and goes galivantin' off over the landscape with *that* goin' on right under where his nose had ought to be."

"Pretty soon Teniente he he come," said Camobay, serene in his confidence in his commander.

"Yeah," scoffed Greg. "And pretty soon Hinobayan and my shoes be gone. There! What did I tell you?"

As he spoke a woman, two girls and a small boy were led out of the stockade, their hands lashed together. Even at that distance Greg recognized one of the girls as the *mestiza* he and Hy Hays had flirted with in the plaza the night before the kidnapping.

"I'm goin' after him myself," he announced. "That skunk ain't goin' to get away with my shoes a second time."

He twirled the cylinder of the pearl-handled revolver with his thumb, and started at a trot down the single street of the village into the thick of the crowd.

Camobay ran after him and seized his arm. The Filipino's eyes were big with warning.

"You stop!" he ordered, positively. "By 'n' by Teniente, he come."

Greg flung off the little officer's restraining hand and hurried on.

Then some one in the crowd must have noticed him. There was a shrill scream; all eyes turned his way, and a sudden silence shut down over the market-place. Greg jammed his revolver into his trousers pocket to leave both hands free, and walked on. The crowd parted to let him pass.

Five feet from Hinobayan he stopped.

"You take them shoes off!" he demanded. "*Sabatos!*" he shouted. "Off! *Pronto, wikiwiki!* You savvy?"

The Moro hesitated an instant too long. Greg stepped in swiftly, using the skill born in many fights, and planted one scientific punch on the exact spot on Hinobayan's chin where it would do the most good. The native flung his arms wide and sagged to the ground.

Greg dropped on his knees, unlaced the yellow shoes and drew them from the slim brown feet. Carefully he examined them.

"Not much damaged," he said, with a sigh of relief.

Then, tying the laces together, he hung the shoes around his neck.

Not till then did he look about him. He was encircled by a close ring of evil faces. Close at his right were the four slaves, still lashed together. Camobay was nowhere in sight. Greg was alone with the Moros.

There was murder in the glittering eyes under the red turbans, murder and the lust for Christian blood in the drawn back, betel-stained lips.

Greg looked them over. He couldn't shoot them all, even if he had the ammunition. Besides, there flashed through his memory McCarthy's having said that a *juramentado* expected a special seat in heaven for killing a Christian. The ring closed in upon him inch by inch. Greg

looked about him at the devil-haunted eyes, and then, deliberately seating himself upon the body of Hinobayan, he took off Hy Hays overly tight shoes.

There was a change now. Mouths parted slightly in astonishment. Black eyes involuntarily looked a question into other black eyes. Was this Christian dog crazed? The ring was watching.

Greg ignored it. He took off his socks and wriggled his toes to ease them. He rubbed the soles of his feet, replaced his socks, put on his tan shoes, and, taking all the time in the world, laced them snuggly. That done he rose, drew out a blue-bordered handkerchief, and proceeded to bind Hinobayan's hands behind Hinobayan's back with all the skill of the sailorman.

Then he turned his prisoner over on his side, drew out Hinobayan's deadly bladed kris from his belt and thrust it into his own. The ring of staring eyes watched curiously. No one stirred. Greg yanked Hinobayan to his feet.

"You are going back to Baiumgon with me," he announced.

Hinobayan blinked and swallowed.

"You too," the sailor said, turning to the slaves and slashing their bonds with Hinobayan's kris. The little *mestizo* squealed delightedly.

That stirred the crowd. The ring began to creep closer and closer. Greg's heart seemed to stop beating, then jumped to his throat. In another moment the tale would be told. He would bluff his way out of this gang, or— He refused to consider the alternative.

He started his captives toward the nearest of the Moros. Every right hand in the street went to the handle of a kris. Greg's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

AT THAT instant a high-pitched voice somewhere back of the crowd sang out in the vernacular, and the ring parted directly in front of him.

Through the gap he saw a resplendent figure advancing toward him. It was a man wearing skin-tight, red silk trousers, decorated with large shell buttons, and an open jacket of vivid blue plush. His head was bound around with a scarlet turban, and his mouth and eyes were wide open in staring terror. Back of him was a little man in the drab uniform of the Island Constabulary.

The little man had the muzzle of his carbine pressed against the spine of the gaudy one before him.

"*Pandita, Pandita!*" murmured the crowd.

Then a lot of things seemed to happen at once. From the bottom of the street arose a chorus of shouts, and Lieutenant McCarthy with the rest of the police band came into view at the double. Almost instantly the market-place was cleared of everyone in sight except Greg, Hinobayan, the ex-slaves, the *pandita* and Camobay.

Red-faced and dripping, McCarthy dashed up.

"Well of all the nerve," he said, taking in the situation, "you've got it, Greg Smiles!"

"We like that, coming from you, don't we, Camobay?" Greg answered, in an injured voice. "You go off on a pleasure hike and leave Cam and me to capture the kidnappers and the kidnapped and get back my shoes."

"We got lost," the lieutenant admitted, a bit shamefacedly. Then he swung about and faced Camobay. "Who've you got there, and why?" he demanded, in Spanish.

Camobay poured out a voluble explanation.

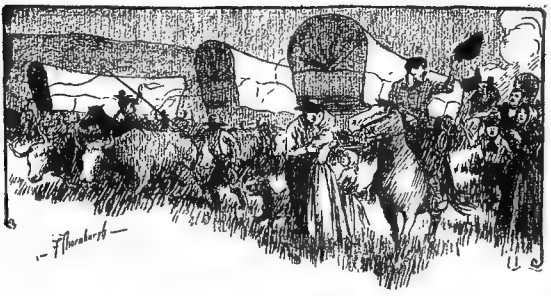
"He says," McCarthy translated for Greg's benefit, "that when you went crazy and went after Hinobayan yourself he struck out after the village priest, the *pandita*, found him, stuck his gun against the old gentleman's spine and brought him here to save you, if he could."

"Did he now?" Greg's eyes filled and smarted. "That was a brave thing to do, and a clever one. Just for that, Camobay, I'm going to give you Hy Hays's shoes for your very own."

And then and there he did just that.

HIGH PRICES ON THE PLATTE

IN 1865 prices for meals—along the Platte River at the stage stations were $1.50 to $2.00. Lumber cost $150 to $200 per thousand board feet; hay brought $100 per ton, wood $75 and more a cord. In Denver flour was around $20 per hundred-weight; eggs, $1.50 per dozen, potatoes $4 a peck and corn was $2.50 per peck.—C. E. M.



BLOOD OF PIONEERS

By WILBUR HALL

Whips cracking, wheels grinding, wagons creaking, men shouting, the forty-six wagons of the Donner party started on the long trip to California. A grim tale is this, but no grimmer than the Sierras or the open frontier of the '40s

CHAPTER I

CALIFORNIA CALLS

PRENTISS STANLEY, riding in toward Springfield, was so completely lost in thought that his mare, cocking one ear back occasionally to keep touch with his mood, nibbled here and there at the tall grass that grew lush and inviting on either side of the road. Once she stopped to pull a more generous mouthful, worrying it with quick jerks of her head to work it past the smooth straight bit. The reins lay slack on her neck; instead of going on she seized the moment to strike viciously at a big horse-fly that had settled back of the girth. Her kick, accompanied by a quick toss of her head, brought the rider out of his trance, and he picked up the reins and touched the mare with his knees.

At the same time he became aware of the quick patter of horses' feet around a bend in the road, and he turned his mare aside barely in time to avoid collision with a black "pole" team hitched to a light spring buggy. Even before he saw the rig he knew it; no one else in Sangamon County drove so recklessly nor so fast as the owner of this outfit. Stanley frowned a little and spoke to his mare.

Zebulon Benton, in the light carriage, kicked his brake and pulled up so quickly as almost to throw his team into the whiffletrees, at the same time making a pert remark to the young woman who rode beside him. She flushed, then leaned out to smile at the horseman.

"Good evening, Prent," she said gaily. "You look as though you had just waked up from a sound sleep."

"Prent's always 'bout half asleep!" Zeb Benton broke in before Stanley could reply. "What you dreamin' about now, Stanley?"

The horseman spoke only to the girl. "Good morning, Miss Mary," he said, in his slow, deep voice. "Pretty day."

"Isn't it? Have you heard the news?"

"Don't know that I have."

"Uncle George Donner and his brother and their folks are thinking of going to California with the Great Overland Caravan that leaves Independence in May."

Prent Stanley started. He had been thinking of California for days; the lure of the West was strongly on him.

"To California in May," he echoed, dejectedly.

"The train starts West then. But the Donners will have to leave Springfield by April fifteenth to make the drive to Inde-

pendence in time." She stopped and flushed. "Think of it, Prent!" she cried. "Across the plains and over the Rockies and into California!"

"I am thinking of it," he said, soberly.

Zeb Benton, who had been checking his team so impatiently that they were now nerved to the point of plunging, jerked them down with a savage tug that exhibited the giant's strength that was in his arms and shoulders. He turned on Prent Stanley.

"Guess you'd like to be goin' West, too, wouldn't you, Prent, if 't wasn't for the savages?" he mocked.

Stanley eyed him. "I might."

"Dog my cats, you tickle me, Prent!" Benton lay back and laughed. "Person'd think you was aimin' to start right out 'thout waitin' for Uncle George and his outfit. Why don't you make a go of it on your own hook, eh? Reckon you could fight off them Injuns single-handed, if you was a mind to! Ho-ho-ho! That's funny, that is! Why, I'd as soon think of goin' myself!"

Mary Greaves looked along her shoulder at her guffawing companion.

"I think Prent would go without much urging, Zeb," she said gravely. "But I don't believe wild horses could drag you."

"Why not, I'd like to know? You don't think I'm scared, do you?"

"I'm not sure. But you wouldn't go of your own free will."

"Ho-ho-ho! I'd go jest for—say, I'll tell you what! I'll go if Prent will. What do you say to that, Prent?"

Stanley turned his mare's head townward before he replied.

"I'm of two minds whether that would be a kindness Zeb," he answered very thoughtfully.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, it would be a good chance to get Sangamon County rid of you; but mighty hard on the caravan I took you in. Good evening, Miss Mary."

Before the enraged Benton could think of a sufficiently cutting answer the bay mare was hidden in her own dust and her rider was out of ear-shot.

It was the spring of the year 1846, and recent events had conspired to draw the attention of Americans westward more than ever before in the history of the new nation. For many decades trappers, hunters and adventurers had been turning their faces toward the setting sun; many of them had returned bringing wonder tales of the West with them. A few emigrants had dared the perils of the plains to seek their fortunes there, and now and then word came back from the fortunate few who got through, describing the wealth and possibilities of the Pacific slopes.

However it was not until Texas, "The Lone Star Republic", had torn itself away from Mexico and finally gained admission to the Union that widespread talk of the heralded land was heard. At the same time, in the Northwest, the boundary dispute between Great Britain and the States as to the rightful location of the Canadian boundary line had reached the place where Americans were using the slogan: "fifty-four forty, or fight!" And this political issue added to the blaze of interest in the land itself.

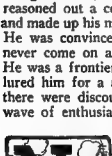
James K. Polk, governor of Tennessee, had been inaugurated President within a few days, and he had had something to say in his inaugural message about the promise of the Western frontier.

But there were more immediate causes for the flame of interest that flared up in '46. One of these was the publication of a book called "Travels Among the Rocky Mountains," by Lansford W. Hastings, an explorer and adventurer, and one of the few men even sketchily familiar with trails, roads and Western lands; the other was a topographical report made to the Government by Captain John C. Fremont, a daring and popular young army officer who, in 1842, had started west under orders to penetrate the Rockies and bring back tidings of what he found concerning routes, Indian tribes, agricultural possibilities, and the feasibility of emigration. Congress was so impressed with the value of the topographical report of his explorations, which was brought forcibly to their attention by Senator Thomas Benton, of Missouri, spokesman for the Great West in Washington, that it ordered the document printed and freely distributed.

Illinois, inhabited entirely by pioneers or by their sons and daughters, caught the emigration fever early, and during the winter of 1845-6 there was no project so much discussed as the West and the possibilities there were for emigrating there. Debate as to the advantages offered by California as against Oregon, and vice versa waxed hot; questions of routes became points of dispute; and violent arguments as to the probable attitudes of various Indian tribes known to inhabit the lands intervening were engaged in by young and old, wise and ignorant, with great spirit if little definite information as premise.

Prentiss Stanley was not one of the disputants. He was, in fact, no talker. He came of a taciturn father and a quiet, studious mother; it was to the latter he owed the schooling that raised him considerably, in manners and speech, above the common run of his neighbors. The elder Stanley had been an impractical dreamer, and all his dreams had come to nought. His death, in the early 'forties, had left the widow and her son with nothing more than a small piece of land; this farm, heavily mortgaged and difficult to crop profitably, the heart-broken wife passed on to her son.

After her death Stanley chafed more and more against the irk of penury, his silent nature cutting him off from sympathy and help. But besides his taciturnity he also had inherited from his father the Stanley thoughtfulness, and at twenty-six he had reasoned out a course of life for himself and made up his mind to follow that course. He was convinced that his chance would never come on a burdened Illinois farm. He was a frontiersman by nature. Texas lured him for a season, but reports from there were discouraging. Then came the wave of enthusiasm for the Far West.



OW as he rode toward Springfield he was not thinking of Zeb Benton nor even of Mary Greaves, although he had often thought of her in the past. What he was thinking was that his chance had come. If he could possibly raise a little more money on his farm he would join the Donners. Mary's news had crystallized all his half-formed plans. He did not know how much money would be required, but he was willing to work his way. Betty, the staunch little mare, would carry him; what he would have to arrange was food and supplies and their transportation.

The more he thought of the plan the better he liked it, and when he had finished his errands in town that afternoon he rode out to the Donner place.

"Come in, Stanley," the old man greeted pleasantly. "What's your trouble?"

George Donner, known and loved throughout Sangamon County as Uncle George, was sixty-two years old, a large, handsome, stalwart old man, strong and able and, for his day, wealthy. He had been pioneering since his youth, in Kentucky, Indiana and Texas. Now he was owner of a large and valuable farm, had a happy family about him, and had reached an age and position where he might have been expected to shrink from further hardship and peril. But the blood of pioneers was in his veins and the appetite for adventuring and moving on into new and unsettled country would not be stifled.

Prentiss Stanley tied his horse and went up to the porch.

"Heard you were going West, Uncle George," he said abruptly.

"Yes, Stanley. Brother Jacob and I have made up our minds. Are you thinking of joining us?"

"I'd like to, Mr. Donner. Haven't much money."

"We would be better off for a few strong young fellows in the train," the old man said heartily. "But it would take about two hundred dollars in cash, besides your outfit and a team."

"Figured on riding—but I don't know where I'd get two hundred dollars."

"How about your ground? Can't you sell that?"

"Got a mortgage on it. Mr. Benton holds it."

"That's bad." George Donner's face clouded. "I expect it's a heavy mortgage —and Amos Benton isn't the man to let his grip slip when he takes hold of a place. Have you any money at all?"

"Sixty dollars."

"Sixty, eh?" He paused, then brightened. "See here, Stanley. I'll tell you what you do. Go to Mr. Benton and see what he will give you in money for your interest in your place. He might offer you something, and you'd better take it. I remember now hearing Judge Greaves say that he wants someone to go out with him in our train and help him with a store of goods he is planning to take to San Francisco. He spoke of a man with experience at selling, but maybe you would fill the bill. Tell Greaves I sent you and that I would like to have you go with him if it is agreeable to him."

"That's mighty friendly of you, Uncle George!"

"Sho—that's nothing. Trot along, son!"

Prentiss Stanley's heart kept time and tune with the rapid beat of the little mare's hoofs as they went scurrying back toward town. It was already too late to go out to Amos Benton's mill, but not too late to go to the Greaves residence. The news that George Donner had given him suggested more than one possibility.

If Judge Greaves would accept him as a helper in his venture, Prentiss would be

able to make the Western emigration; if he were successful and his service pleased the judge, who could tell what might come of the connection thus established with Mary Greaves? Mary had always seemed to Prentiss as far above him as the stars that twinkled so thickly above the Illinois prairies at night. But with his education, his youth, his strength and an opportunity—

JUDGE SONDER GREAVES was one of the important figures of Springfield and generally known as a hard man to reach. He had few friends and no intimates, but his acquaintanceship included every man, woman and child in that part of Illinois. He had been a circuit judge in New England, had accumulated a competency and had come to Springfield in its early days and established himself as the leading lawyer. Prentiss Stanley wondered at this man engaging in trade, taking a stock of wares westward to set himself up as a merchant.

The lawyer was curt, cool, and direct.

"If George Donner sent you, young man," he said, "you have come with high recommendation, though I did want someone who had experience in merchandising. Have you any money?"

"Mighty little."

"It would be necessary for me to meet your expenses *en route*, then?"

"No, Judge. I can raise enough."

"You think you can, do you? Hum-m-m! Well, unless something transpires to cause me to change my plans I will take you as my assistant. I will draw up a paper that will represent our understanding in the matter, and you can come to me in a week to sign it. There are two things I want to have clear, however.

"The first is this: I require in you the strictest habits of morality, sobriety and industry. I knew your father slightly and I know your reputation in the community. But I do not know you, and I warn you that any lapses on your part, of any sort whatever, will cause me to annul the entire bargain between us. In view of the fact that I am taking all the responsibility of this project and furnishing you with an opportunity I do not, I believe, ask too much."

"You'll find me up to snuff, Judge, I reckon."

"I hope so. Now, as to the second matter: for reasons of my own I wish our arrangement to be kept secret. My enterprise I am undertaking with Amos Benton, the miller. We are equal partners in the business. But you are the only one who knows this and you are to keep the matter to yourself. Come back in a week and I shall be ready for you."

"Thank you, Judge Greaves. I understand. Good night, sir."

"Good night."

Mary Greaves was at the garden gate when Stanley passed out.

"Good evening, Prent," she said, laughing at his surprise over seeing her. "You look as though you had had good news."

"I have," he said quietly.

"What is it?"

"I can't tell, Miss Mary."

"Oh, indeed!" she pouted. "Very well," and she made as though to walk up the path past him.

He touched her arm timidly. "I'm sorry, Miss Mary," he said, gulping. "I'd rather tell you than any body on earth."

"You would?" she asked. His gentleness changed her mood. "Never mind, Prent, I was only funning. I don't want to know your secret. At least I think I do know it. Perhaps Father is going to let you go West with him." She was watching his face roguishly, but there was not a sign on it to tell her whether she had hit the mark. "I know Father is planning to go—but he didn't want the fact known. When I saw your horse here at the gate I guessed why you had come. And nothing, I know, would make you so happy as a chance to go West."

Still he did not rise to her bait. "I'd like to go, Miss Mary," was all he said.

"Can you keep another secret?" she asked, suddenly.

"Yes."

"I'm going West with you and Father."

"You" He stepped back from her and stared. "You're just talking!"

"I am perfectly serious. Father doesn't know it yet, but I am leading him up to the subject gradually. When the Donners leave on the fifteenth I'll be in one of the big wagons up somewhere in the front of the line!"

Prentiss Stanley held out his hand. "Miss Mary," he blurted, "don't do it. Don't go—don't try to. It won't be all fun. You're safe here."

"Oh, pooh! Do you think I'm afraid of Indians, like Zeb Benton? I should say I am not—and I intend to go."

"Do you think your father will let you?"

"He's been letting me have my own way ever since I could talk."

"Guess that's so," Prent agreed, grinning. "You contrive to be a middling good persuader. Well, if you will go, I guess some of us will be glad to have you along."

Triumph flashed in her face.

"I knew you'd tell me," she crowed, happily. "Some of you will be glad to have me along, eh? Oh, Prent—all you men are alike—a woman can twist you around her finger!"

He colored and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

"I promised your father—" he began.

She came closer to him, so close that she had to stand on tiptoe to speak to him softly, as she did speak.

"Prent," she whispered, "you've kept your promise to father nobly. You have told me nothing. And if you will be glad to have me go, Prent Stanley, I'm—I'm glad!"

Before he could answer her she had fled into the dusk of that garden, heavy with the scent of spring roses.

CHAPTER II.

AN OBSTACLE

THE Benton Grist Mill was the office and castle of the Giant of Sangamon County. Amos Benton, shrewd New Englander mortgage holder, owner in fee or in interest of thousands of acres of rich prairie land, was the dominant figure in the community and the richest. His wife had been a raw-boned, bleak and terrible woman whose memory was still green in Sangamon County because of her capacities as a scold and termagant.

Zebulon, Benton's only child, took after his mother, the Amazon, in stature, temperament, appearance and disposition. He was surly, dull, and unmanageable. He and his father were as illy-mated as father and son ever were, the old man being a coward and schemer, Zeb being truculent and bullying; the father being small, wiry, and almost weazened, the son Herculean, with the arms and back of a blacksmith.

The Mill was situated on the Sangamon River, about five miles north of Springfield, and it was thither that Prentiss Stanley rode on the next morning after his interview with George Donner and Judge Greaves, seeking a talk with the man who held the mortgage on his little twenty acre farm. The mill itself was idle, probably through lack of custom, but the rush of the river, high with its spring floods, rose above the clatter of the mare's hoofs as Prent came up to the door.

He had dismounted and was at the foot of the short flight of stairs leading up from the road to the counting room of the miller when Stanley heard loud voices, the shrill and angry wailing of old Amos Benton and the gruff thunder of his son.

"You are a disgrace to your father's name, Zeb Benton!" the old man cried. "And when I say that Judge Greaves and I have decided to send young Stanley west with the train that's enough for you!"

"'Tain't enough!" Zeb shouted angrily. "That Stanley is a sneakin' catamount, an' it's unnat'ral for you to pass me over for him! I am to have Mary Greaves if I have to go kowtowin' to her old man from here to Jericho, an' you can put that down an' so can he!"

"Don't yell at me, young man!"

"I'll yell if I please! I don't hanker to go to Californy, but I ain't goin' to be passed over for no Prent Stanley!"

"Why, you big lummox," the father cried, beside himself with exasperation, "you haven't the heart to go to California! You'd be afraid to go!"

"Who you talkin' to?" Zeb's tone was threatening. "Don't you tell me. I'm afeared, or, father or no father, I'll clump your head for you!"

"What?"

"I said it! You shut up, or I'll——"

There were sounds as of the old man coming toward the door and Prentiss Stanley drew back. He did not imagine that Zeb Benton would do his father an injury, but it did seem likely that one or the other of them might come out of the office at any minute and find him there, apparently eavesdropping on their family quarrel. He knew both of them well enough to know that, however they stood toward one another, they would stand together against outsiders. His own mission would be made fruitless by discovery in his present position. Therefore, as quickly as he could, he swung up and moved the mare out along the river road.

As he reached a safe distance and turned aside into a lane, he sighted "Butcher" Kranz, a hoodlum from the lower part of the county, who bore an evil reputation as a gambler and rogue and who was a great chum of Zeb Benton's. "Butcher" grinned at him sidewise, but passed without comment.

Stanley rode only a rod or so farther, then turned and started back for the mill.

As he came into sight of the building he saw Zeb Benton, apparently greatly excited, hurriedly saddling his big black, in a lean-to below the mill. Butcher Kranz was leaning down from his nag talking swiftly. As Stanley came into view the hoodlum pointed and Zeb looked up quickly. A moment later he swung into his saddle and he and Kranz galloped furiously away down the river, without looking back.

Amazed at their behavior, and becoming a little disturbed by the mysterious incidents, he pressed the mare with his knees and she brought him with a rush to the door of the mill office.

"Halloa!" he cried, as he flung off.

There was no response from within. He leaped up the steps, but found the door locked. He tried to see through the small pane of glass in the panels, but it was covered with flour dust and grime. For a moment he listened, uncertain what to do. The noise of the quarrel he had heard, the threats Zeb Benton had made against his father, and the strange actions of the pair that had just ridden off, decided him. He stepped back, lunged with his shoulder against the door, and went catapulting into the room.

On the floor beyond the low counter dividing the office lay the body of Amos Benton, motionless and with blood running from a gash in his head.

Young Stanley leaped over the counter and knelt. The old man was not dead, but he had been struck a terrible blow and was unconscious and breathing with difficulty. Water from a bucket had been poured over him, undoubtedly by his frightened son, but this had served only to drench his whole upper body and to accomplish nothing else. Stanley loosed the tight, stiff stock the little man wore, rubbed his hands, and, sopping up some of the water from the floor with a handkerchief, wiped the white face.

Seeing that his ministrations were accomplishing nothing, he went into an adjoining room, and there, in a corner cupboard, found a small bottle of blackberry cordial. With this, forced with difficulty between the set teeth, he contrived at last to get some encouraging responses from the injured man and, after fifteen minutes of anxiety, succeeded in bringing him back, slowly and feebly, to consciousness.

"Better now?" he asked.

"Hurts!" the old man muttered weakly, shaking his head. "What did you do it for, Zeb?"

"Zeb's gone, Mr. Benton," Stanley said. "I happened in."

"Who are you? Oh, young Stanley!"

"Yes. Don't try to talk. I'll get help."

"All right. Wait!"

He breathed laboredly for a few momtnts. Then he pulled at Stanley's coat. The young man leaned closer.

"Mistake," the sufferer managed to enunciate. "Don't tell—on Zeb!"

His voice sank lower and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Throwing over the still form a heavy coat that lay on a nearby chair, Stanley went out, jumped to his mare's back, and rode neck-or-nothing for Springfield.

HALF an hour later old Dr. Hawke and Judge Greaves were on their way to the mill behind the judge's pacing geldings. As there was nothing further Prentiss Stanley could do, he decided, for two reasons, to ride over to Boody Hill, nine miles south, for the day.

One reason was that he thought he might be able to sell Jake Boody the two cows and yearling calves he owned; the other that he wanted to avoid being asked, for the moment, what he knew about the injury of old Amos Benton. If the hurt were slight it was probable, he reasoned, that no questions would be asked at all after the first few hours; if it proved serious there was plenty of time for him to decide what he should do about the old man's request that he keep the quarrel with Zeb a secret.

He found Boody ready to buy the stock and to pay good prices, in silver. They completed the deal on the spot, Stanley taking the money, and Boody agreeing to come on the morrow and drive the cattle home.

"Any news in town?" he asked, anxious to keep his visitor as long as he could.

"Not much. Old Amos Benton had an accident this morning."

"Accident?"

"At the mill. Knocked him unconscious."

"Did, eh? Wisht it had a-killed him! Sangamon County could spare him. If he'd give me another fortnight's time on my payments I'd never have lost the Duncan place this spring. Meaner'n dirt, that old man is!"

The farmer lapsed into reminiscences

then and it was four o'clock before Stanley finally left the hill. He rode home in leisurely fashion, taking the old lower turnpike south of Springfield that led directly to his own little place, and looking forward to the next few months and the changes they must make in his life.

At six o'clock, with dusk already gathering, he pulled up at his own barred gate, surprised to find the bars down. He looked all around, but saw no one, rode in, put up the bars, and started walking toward his cabin, leading the mare. A rod from his door he was stopped suddenly by the voice of Drew Savage, the sheriff of the county.

"Prentiss Stanley," he cried, in the bailiff's tones in use by peace offices of that day, "I call on you to surrender in the name of the law!"

Stanley stared, dropping the bay mare's reins.

"All right, Drew," he drawled; "I'm peaceable enough. What do you want me for?"

The sheriff, his legal duty performed in proper manner, relaxed and spoke naturally.

"I guess you know all right, Prent," he said. "Though I must say that it beat me when I heard the news from the county attorney and got the warrant from Judge Bacon. You're wanted for a murderous assault on the person of Amos Benton, and for robbery. My orders are to search you."

Young Stanley took off his hat and drew a long breath. "Does anybody believe I hit Old Man Benton?" he asked, slowly. "And robbery? What was I supposed to have taken?"

The sheriff stepped closer.

"I'll just make a search, while we're talking," he remarked, apologetically enough. "Why, yes, it was hard to believe, all right, as I told you—hard for me. But Butcher Kranz was passing, he says, and—by jiminy, Prent!"

With the exclamation the officer drew out Stanley's long chamois-skin "poke" from a rear pocket, jerked it adeptly and stood gazing at the greenbacks and silver exposed on his palm.

"Forty-six dollars!" he said, counting quickly. "Prent, I wouldn't have thought it of you! Where'd you spend the four dollars?"

"What four dollars?"

"The other four. But I guess you know, well enough." He paused uncertainly. "Anything you want to do before we go back to town, Prent?"

"I'd ought to milk."

"Go ahead. I'll wait. But you know what will happen if you try any tricks on me, Stanley!"

"I'm not up to tricks, Drew."

Half an hour later, with his chores done, the young man mounted his mare and the two started back to town. On the way Stanley succeeded in inducing the officer to tell him all he knew, which was not much. Dr. Hawke had found the old miller badly hurt, with only an even chance for recovery. The mystery of the assault seemed partially explained when it was found that about fifty dollars paid by a merchant of the town to Benton early that morning were missing from the office till, where the merchant had seen it deposited. That someone had attacked the old man to rob him was apparent. Then Butcher Kranz had come riding into town to say that he had just heard of the assault, that he had seen Prentiss Stanley hanging about the mill that morning, that he had heard him in the office quarreling with Old Man Benton, and that he had seen him leave at a furious gallop on his bay mare.

"That was when I rode in to get Doc Hawke," Stanley said, quietly. "It don't look like I would have done that, does it, if——"

"It would have been the best thing for you to do if you wanted to get clear of suspicion, Prent," the officer said, coldly. "It's an old ruse."

"And you say they charge me with taking fifty dollars?"

"Yes. Judge Greaves says that you told him last night you knew how you could raise money enough to make the Western trip in the Donner party. Is that what you told the judge?"

"Yes, it is."

"And Uncle George Donner says you told him that Amos Benton held a mortgage on your place and that he told you to go and see whether Benton would buy you out of your interest. On top of that I find forty-odd dollars in your jeans. No, Prent, I guess it'll be a surprise to everybody, but I don't see how the case could look blacker for you."

"Does look black, all right," Stanley said. He was still unable to take the matter seriously. "But it'll clear up. I didn't touch old Mr. Benton or his money either, that's sure."

"Then where did you get the money?"

"I sold my cows and two yearlings to Jake Boody this afternoon."

"Jake Boody. Um-m-m. Been over there to see him, have you?"

"Yes. Just got back."

The sheriff whistled.

"That'll make it bad for you, too, Stanley," he said earnestly. "If you'd said you sold to anybody else—but everyone in the county knows that Jake Boody has hated Old Man Benton for a quarter of a century and has made threats often to get even with him. What people will say is that Boody would claim he paid you this money and would help to shield you just out of satisfaction. The more you say, the blacker things look. If you'll listen to my advice you'll quit talking right now!"

"I've nothing to fear."

"Suit yourself, Stanley." The officer shrugged. "Ride up a little, will you? I'm getting kind of sick of this business!"

A FEW minutes later Prentiss Stanley was in the old Sangamon County jail. The turnkey, a veteran of the War of 1812 and a political appointee who owed his place to the influence of Amos Benton, turned the lock with a grunt of satisfaction and an unfriendly order to "mind what you're about!" The cell was dark, cold and damp. Nobody came near it that evening.

In the morning Stanley managed to get a promise from an under-sheriff that someone would ride out to Boody's hill and tell Jake to go and get his stock at once, to save the cows from suffering. The day dragged on until late afternoon, when the prisoner was taken into court and questioned by the county attorney. The latter was as skeptical of Stanley's story as the more friendly sheriff had been.

"The grand jury will be summoned in May," he said, shortly, as he rose to leave the room.

Five days passed and not a friendly face appeared at the door of Prentiss Stanley's cell. For an hour each afternoon he was permitted to walk up and down in a short, dark corridor on which his and three other dungeon-like holes opened, but aside from that he had no exercise. He was fed plain, coarse food, but his appetite failed rapidly. He had no chance to send messages without a long and irritating argument with the savage old turnkey. He was told, one afternoon, that Jake Boody had called to see him, and at another time that two of the young farmers of his own neighborhood had applied for a pass.

"But I reckoned it was just as well to keep you dark for a while," the turnkey chuckled. "We'll wait till we find out if Amos Benton is going to live or die before we let you fix up any schemes with your cronies!"

It was just as well, as far as Stanley was concerned. All his plans and dreams were come to nought. Uncle George Donner had given evidence against him, as Sheriff Savage had told him on the day of his arrest. Judge Greaves had turned on him—and Stanley remembered the old attorney's stipulation that strict rectitude would be required of him if he were to go West as the judge's assistant!

Zeb Benton he could not hear of, but it was probable that the young ruffian was keeping very quiet and showing great solicitude for his father. "Butcher" Kranz was undoubtedly a local hero, the most important witness in a case that was certainly stirring the whole county. His own friends, few enough because of his quiet life, Prent shrewdly concluded were now afraid to show their friendship where they could do him no good and might do themselves harm.

Late in the afternoon of the tenth of April, five days before the Donner party was to set out for Independence, Missouri, to join the Great Overland Caravan on its Western emigration, Prentiss Stanley was aroused by voices at his door, the sound of the lock turned, and the sight of the turnkey and a woman. The surly old veteran had a slightly different note in his voice when he spoke; it seemed less harsh and more conciliatory.

"Mr. Stanley," he said, "a lady to see you—Miss Mary Greaves."

Chapter III

THE FIRST CLASH

INDEPENDENCE, Missouri, last outpost of civilization on the Western frontier of America, the point of departure for practically all the travelers of the day whose faces were set toward the Unknown Country, was always a busy town; in the middle of May, 1846, it was a teeming hive.

Night and day for weeks the prairie schooners had been rolling ceaselessly in from all parts of the then West, from

Kentucky's grassy lands, from Illinois and Indiana and from points farther east. The town itself was full of opportunist merchants, stocked heavily with such articles as the Western adventurers were likely to want or need. Few of them had established places of business; the streets and corrals and the flat lands adjacent to the town itself were their markets, and many of them walked or drove or pushed barrows about, hawking their wares.

Blacksmith shops were numerous, and all so busy that for days at a time travelers were waiting their turn to have a yoke mended, a wheel re-tired, an axle repaired, a brake-rod put on, or small bits of hand-forged steel turned out for special purposes. They were a good-natured, accommodating, and popular set, these smiths, seldom overcharging their customers, as they might have done, and always ready, with a laugh or a joke, to turn in and help an emigrant in difficulty.

The rush of that May month was due to the broadcast announcement that a great caravan, probably to number one thousand wagons, would leave Independence on the fifteenth. As a matter of fact, the Great Overland Caravan never did materialize as it had been planned, for as fast as emigrants reached Independence they struck up acquaintanceship with those already there and parties large and small were formed to press on. Nevertheless the advertising and the report of the Caravan plans had the effect of bringing westward at one time hundreds who would have hesitated to start without some such program ahead of them. The result was that a continuous caravan, three or four hundred miles in length, from the first party out to the last, late in May, moved off toward the land of the setting sun in that early summer.

Emigrants westward were not the only persons moving into and out of Independence in that time. The town was the beginning of three important Western trails—the Santa Fe, running southwestward into Mexican territory with the ancient and picturesque town of Santa Fe, now of New Mexico, as the terminus; the Oregon trail and the California trail, these two following the same route as far as Fort Bridger, Wyoming. There were trains leaving over these trails, but of far more interest to the emigrants were the parties constantly coming in.

Most of the Santa Fe trailers, driving as they did over better roads and through fewer mountains, used horses or mules, and these teams, with their tinkling bells on all the leaders, were like voices from an unknown world to the sojourners from the East. The drivers were largely men who had made more than one round trip; many of them were bronzed and hardy men to whom Indian troubles, Western country and the adventure of travel were old, old stories.

The returned travelers from the Oregon and the California trails had divergent stories to tell. They were older men, going East for families, for supplies, or for stocks of goods, and full of enthusiasm, each for the country of his choice.

Indians, trappers, hunters and explorers kept drifting in, bringing names of regions and tales of tribesmen of a thrilling and awful nature. These were the people most sought after for advice and information. Generally speaking, the Indians would afford little satisfaction, but the trappers and explorers liked nothing better than to give free advice to emigrants. That most of it was useless and in fact unsafe and mistaken advice made no difference, apparently, to either side. Many a heap of bleaching bones and many a wreck of wagon trains spoke eloquently in those early years of the result of that advice, given thoughtlessly and in ignorance but accepted eagerly and as indubitable truth, with privation, suffering, thirst, cold and death as the reward!

TOWARD Independence, on the afternoon of the eleventh of May there came one party of nine large and well-built wagons, drawn by sleek and perfectly trained oxen, and led by a fine looking, stalwart old man on a black horse, who was accompanied by a gigantic youth, sitting his mount heavily and wearing on his face a surly and discontented look that he was at no great pains to conceal from his chief.

The two, moving half a mile ahead of their train, came into the environs of the Western town, chose a camping spot for the night, and made inquiries of two or three already there concerning the plans of the Great Caravan. When told that the trains of emigrants were moving onward without waiting for a formal start, the elderly man frowned.

"That has a dangerous look to me, Zeb," he said, in his resonant, strong voice. "Impatience—that is our besetting sin in

these days. To get on—to get on, without giving a thought to safety, comfort, or the best good of all!"

The younger man nodded.

"Guess they ain't any of 'em goin' to give any of the rest of 'em the head-start, if they can help it," he said. "Maybe we better strike on too. What do you think, Uncle George?"

"I will make inquiries now. I know of several parties coming this way, and if we go on it will be with some of them. You ride back, Zeb, and meet the train, and I will go into Independence."

The young man wheeled his horse with an unnecessarily violent pull on the bridle reins and galloped off, while the older man proceeded into the town.

An hour later the train had pulled in, oxen had been unyoked, supplies for the night had been unloaded, and every person in the party was busy at some task, even to the children, who gathered sticks for firewood, or ran, shouting and laughing, to wash in the stream and bring water up for supper needs. The youth who had guided the train to its camp rode about for some time overseeing the tasks, giving surly orders, and making himself generally officious and a nuisance. Finally, having exercised more than his slender authority, he pulled up at the wagon that had come fourth into the camp, and threw himself from his horse.

A slender and beautiful young woman, straightening from her campfire to whip a lock of hair out of her eyes and at the same time to get some of the pungent smoke of the fire out of her lungs, discovered him eyeing her. She nodded shortly, and half-turned away.

He crossed to her impatiently, his face set in a dark scowl.

"Look here, Mary," he growled, crossly; "you ain't had a decent word or look for me since I joined the train ten days back. I don't mind your havin' tantrums, but, dog my cats, I ain't goin' to put up with your slights any longer!"

The girl stood up and looked at him disdainfully.

"You aren't? What are you going to do about them?"

"That's all right—you know what I can do!"

"I do know what you can do. You can interfere with my father and his plans for setting up a store in California with the stock he and your father bought. You can send false reports about him to your father and make trouble for us. You can do all the little, mean, despicable, sneaking things that a mean, despicable, cowardly man could think of. But I'll tell you now, Zeb Benton, that you cannot make me speak one decent or civil word to you, nor gain one pleasant look from me, no matter what you do. I've tried to make you understand this without talking before, but now I have had to tell you and I have done it. Good night!"

She turned her back.

Zeb Benton shifted uncomfortably where he stood and made an angry face and a threatening gesture with one arm, but the girl did not see him, nor care to. Feeling beaten, and yet doggedly unwilling to give in, he tried one more move.

"See here, Mary," he began, in wheedling tone, "I don't aim to cause your father no trouble. I ain't goin' to bother you none if you don't want me to. I want to be friends."

She made no reply, nor did she look at him or appear to have heard him. He moved around the fire and lowered his voice.

"Now, honey," he said; "you ain't no call to be plagued with me. I'm the best friend you've got and——"

The girl stepped aside suddenly and cupped a hand to her lips.

"Father Greaves!" she called, quite loudly. "Oh, Father! Supper!"

Choking with rage, Zeb Benton seized the girl's wrist and bent over her.

"All right, young lady," he growled, in a fury; "you're going to be sorry you acted this way! I can wait! I can wait till we get to Californy and I can wait a long time afterward. But some day you'll be bowing and scraping when I come to call. Remeber that!"

With an oath he flung away, mounted his tired horse and rode furiously off to the wagon of the leader.

JUDGE SONDER GREAVES appeared at the girl's campfire a moment after Zeb Benton had gone. He was dressed as carefully and neatly as though in his own home; even his high boots were carefully oiled and his hair shone with pomatum. His grave face lighted as he approached.

"Captain Donner just rode out from Independence," he said. "He has made several new acquaintances and met friends, and he seriously considers pressing on

westward tomorrow instead of waiting for the fifteenth."

"I don't see why he shouldn't," the girl replied. "In a train of twenty or thirty wagons we would surely be safe enough, and we could travel much more rapidly."

"I suppose so. That is what is in the Captain's mind."

Mary Greaves looked up at her father intently for a moment, trying to decide how to approach the subject that concerned her. Finally she took a direct course.

"Father," she said, "do you still believe that Prent Stanley attacked Mr. Benton and robbed him?"

Her father frowned. "I must ask you again, daughter, to refrain from discussing that matter. I certainly am convinced of his guilt."

"I want to ask another question, Judge. Have you fully made up your mind to admit Zeb Benton to your trading venture in the West?"

"I—ahem—I expect to do so."

"Now, will you hear me patiently for a moment? I am going to make you very angry, but I believe that you will soon forgive me and agree that I am right in taking the course I have decided on."

The judge moved uncomfortably. As it so hapened he was not entirely satisfied with the peremptory manner in which he had abandoned Prentiss Stanley and accepted as true the charge made against that youth; as it also so happened he was extremely disturbed over the prospect of accepting Zebulon Benton as his business partner.

Zeb had appeared in the train a week or two before, reporting that he had been away from Springfield on business when the Donner party left there, but that he was now overtaking it at the request of his father, who desired him to accompany Judge Greaves and act as his assistant and partner in the mercantile enterprise the judge and the elder Benton had projected.

The judge had inquired, naturally enough, whether Mr. Benton had sent him any letter in regard to the matter, to which Zeb, in an embarrassed and peculiar manner, had answered that his father wasn't well enough yet to write. Seeing no alternative presented, Judge Greaves had made the best of a bad bargain and accepted Zeb with all the appearance of cordiality that, on such short notice and for such a character, he could summon.

Now he was confronted by his daughter with two questions that he would vastly have preferred to dismiss from his mind.

He cleared his throat again with great dignity.

"Proceed, Mary," he said, and tried to look judicial.

"I want to tell you, first, Father, that I went to the jail in Springfield before we left and Prentiss Stanley told me enough to convince me that he was innocent and that he would be proven so. I went straight to Nathan Wetherby."

"The county attorney?"

"Yes. I asked him to find out the truth about the attack on Amos Benton and to secure the liberty of Prentiss Stanley, and Nathan Wetherby assured me that he would do what he could."

"But what could he do? The testimony of that young—er—Kranz, and circumstantial evidence alone——"

"Land's sakes! The testimony of the most worthless rascal in Sangamon County, and a lot of circumstantial evidence that wouldn't convict a dog of killing sheep! Pooh, Father! I'm surprised to hear a circuit judge talk that way! I hadn't spoken to you about this before because I didn't believe you could do anything back home, even if you wanted to. But today I found out something that changes the whole matter. You can take action now, by sending a message back to Springfield."

"Eh—how is that, Mary?"

"You know that black horse Zeb Benton rides? He bought it from Mr. Howe. Today I happened to be talking to Mrs. Howe and she told me this."

"I don't see," the judge interposed, "what this has to do——"

"You will in a moment. It was charged against Prentiss Stanley that he stole fifty dollars from Mr. Benton's office, you remember. Yes. Well, the fifty dollars was one bill that Mr. Ben had taken in that morning. When Prentiss was arrested he had a few small bills and some silver that he had got from Jake Boody for his cows. He told me that and I believe it. When Zeb Benton bought his horse from Charles Howe he gave Mr. Howe a fifty-dollar bill."

The judge cogitated for a moment.

"Even those facts," he said, slowly, "wouldn't prove anything conclusively, my child. They would only form a chain of circumstantial evidence——"

Mary laughed aloud.

"You'd convict Prent Stanley with damning circumstances and refuse to consider them in a case against Zeb Benton, then?" she demanded. "Oh, no, Father—confess that I have you!"

"You minx!" the old man exclaimed, in some confusion. "I—er—I refuse to be taken in by such woman's reasoning. I—ahem—I will admit that the—er—circumstances——"

"Oh, shucks, Judge," Mary pouted, "you are just trying to argue yourself into a better position. Be a good man, now, and confess that you were mistaken!"

It was a bitter pill for the old judge to swallow. He saw that he had thrown himself open to the charge of jumping at a conclusion, and that was a charge he hated to plead guilty to at any time. Nevertheless Mary was certainly logical. He noted that fact with pride. If he could squirm around somehow——

ABRUPTLY he rose, looking off toward the end of the camp.

"What's that?" he asked, sharply. "An altercation? Come!"

Mary jumped up with him, the whole party was streaming toward the scene, and presently they saw that two men, one on a small, wiry horse that was covered with a sweaty lather, and the other Zeb Benton on his enormous black, were in dispute. Benton urged his horse into the smaller animal, and the rider of the latter, as Judge Greaves came up, raised his heavy riding crop.

"Hold back, there, Zeb Benton!" he cried. "I won't hit your horse!"

"And you won't hit me, either!" Zeb Benton roared, roweling his black savagely and reaching forward with one of his long, powerful arms.

The force of the impact caught the small horse squarely on the shoulder and, weary as it was, the animal was sent back on to its haunches. It struggled for footing, slipped, and went rolling into a deep gully. Instantly the rider was up.

"I warned you, Zeb!" he cried. With a leap he was at the side of the black. Before Benton could ride wide, or strike, or dodge, the other man had him by the leg and the waist. A terrific tug lifted the big fellow from his saddle. A quick wrench jerked him out of it. A heave sent him sprawling to the earth.

He clambered up, spitting blood from a nasty cut on his lip and cursing in a rage.

"I'll settle you, you jail-bird!" he roared, "You can't do me like you done father!"

"I can do you as *you* did your father!" Prentiss Stanley answered, so clearly that everyone in the group heard him.

With a step forward he caught Zeb Benton, left hand and then right, squarely in the teeth, and the giant went down, to stay.

Judge Sonder Greaves, with Mary clinging to his arm, pushed through the crowd that was circling in, some of them outraged at the treatment given the son of Sangamon County's biggest man, others half glad, but all showing scowling faces and black looks to the young man they had left in the Springfield jail, apparently on his way to the penitentiary for assault and robbery.

"Put him out!" they cried. "Tar and feather him! Send him back to jail!"

Prentiss Stanley eyed them calmly, turned, and caught the dragging bridle reins of his weary and frightened little bay mare, that had struggled to her feet and now stood with trembling limbs and hanging head. The young man patted the leathery neck of his mount affectionately, confronting the crowd again.

"You're wrong about me, folks," he said, simply. Mr. Benton got better a few days after you left, and he told the officers I wasn't guilty of striking him. The stolen money wasn't found, but the ones of you who have known me ever since I was a boy won't believe that I took any man's money. Anyhow, they set me free, and here I am."

Zeb Benton sat up and shook a weak fist at Stanley.

"That's all a lie!" he cried, harshly. "He done my father up and then he broke jail, I'll bet on that! I tried to drive him out of this camp just now and here's what I got for it. Arrest him and send him back to the calaboose in Springfield, where he belongs! He stole that fifty dollars as sure as we're all——"

"Stop!"

It was the firm voice of Judge Sonder Greaves. Everyone in the train turned to look. The judge stepped into the circle, with Mary beside him. The place was quiet as one of his old-time court-rooms.

"Zebulon Benton!" he said, *oracularly*, "you are a disgrace to Sangamon County and to this expedition. That money you spoke of was a fifty-dollar bill. Prentiss Stanley had no fifty-dollar bill, either when he was arrested or before, and currency of that denomination is not so common in Sangamon County that two of you could be carrying it around like coppers." He turned to the crowd. "There was a fifty-dollar bill stolen," he said, "and there was

a fifty-dollar bill spent in Springfield three days after old Mr. Amos Benton was struck down in his counting-room. Charles Howe!" the judge cried, peremptorily. "I summon you to step forth and tell this expedition who it was passed a fifty-dollar bill to you just before we started west!"

Charles Howe, embarrassed by this sudden concentration of all the attention on him, took off his hat and sheepishly faced the judge.

"Why, I tell you, Judge; I got a fifty-dollar bill for that black horse there from Zeb Benton."

For a moment there was silence; then a cheer was started for Prentiss Stanley. The judge checked it.

"I have one more word to say," he announced. "I turned against young Stanley in his trouble and permitted myself to be —ahem—misled by appearances. I am sorry for my mistake, and I offer Mr. Stanley my apologies. Furthermore, I desire you all to know that I am taking him in with me here and now as an associate with me on the expedition and in my business when I reach our destination."

This time there was a cheer. It had hardly died away when someone cried, "Captain Donner!"

They all turned. Sitting quietly on his horse, surveying the scene, was the big, broad-shouldered, handsome chieftain of their party. When they were quiet he spoke slowly and distinctly.

"My friends," he said, "I am just come from Independence, where I have concluded arrangements to attach our train to a caravan leaving at daybreak for California. You must be ready at that time; therefore I adjure you now to seek your rest. Our great adventure begins tomorrow with the dawn!"

Chapter IV

THE LONG ROAD

EN shouting, dogs barking, whips cracking, wheels grinding and groaning, wagons rumbling, cattle lowing, shouts of encouragement and good cheer from bystanders, cheerful and hopeful farewells from the wagon train—this was the departure of the Donner party from Independence on that morning of the twelfth of May, 1846. With them went a party led by Ex-Governor L. W. Boggs of Missouri.

One week after leaving Independence, making from twelve to twenty miles a day over the smooth prairies, they came, late in the evening, to an appointed meeting-place where they joined the train of Colonel Russell, a trained frontiersman and guide.

At daybreak on the twenty-first a trumpet call aroused the emigrants and by seven o'clock the first of the long line was moving out. Forty-six wagons, most of them well-built, strong, and fully-equipped, now composed the train. There were three hundred and fifty head of cattle, which included oxen, milk cows, a few steers for beef, about thirty horses, mostly saddle animals, and one or two well-bred young colts. Of the emigrants ninety-eight were listed as fighting men—a grave and serious classification made in that form in view of the fact that, from this time forward, they might expect attack from Indians at any moment—fifty women, and about thirty children. Of the women and children many walked or rode horseback, but the majority traveled in the great covered wagons.

It is amazing to contemplate the calmness and fortitude shown by these women of the emigrant parties of those days. Not only were they braving unknown perils of thirst, famine, cold and lost trails, but they were braving the very real and fully established perils of Indian incursions and the moral certainty that not all of those who started would ever arrive at their journey's end. Hopeful, cheery, encouraging, smiling, ready to serve, patient in tribulations and difficulty, brave in stress, uncomplaining under grievous hardships, they went forward with their men—those hardy women who gave the West its sons and daughters of today, with their heritage of fine Americanism!

Mary Greaves was saying something like this to Prentiss Stanley, one morning late in the month, while the train was looking forward to the crossing of the Big Blue River.

"I've thought that way about you, Miss Mary," he said gravely.

"About me? Nonsense! I came for the love of it. I ride in the best wagon in the whole train, on buffalo robes laid on a tick mattress. I sleep in linen and eat as well as I would in Springfield. Everyone waits on me, coddles me, spoils me. I am no more a frontier heroine than Zeb Benton is a frontiersman!"

"Just the same it took more spunk than most girls have to——"

She laughed at him along her shoulder.

"Let's change the subject," she said. "What about Zeb? Are you watching him? He is planning some unusual meanness, or I'm mistaken!"

"Oh, I guess Zeb's bark's worse than his bite." Stanley shrugged. "Have you seen the wild flower collection Mrs. Donner is making?"

"Yes. And it's a lovely morning, and I'm quite well, and thank you for your good wishes, and we are making very good time—and all that!" She chopped off her words shrewishly and pouted.

Prentiss Stanley, simple of heart, direct of manner, and single of purpose, was never within range of understanding Mary Greaves. Such moods as her present one baffled him completely.

"Why, Mary!" he cried, hurt and anxious. "What did I do?"

"You changed the subject, as you always do when I am talking about you!"

Prent Stanley swallowed hard, cleared his throat, colored, and then took a fearful plunge—for him. He waxed personal.

"Would it make any difference to you if I was hurt, Mary?" he asked.

She answered him quickly, looking into his eyes.

"Yes, Prent, a great deal of difference," she said, softly.

Stanley's heart leaped. At that moment, as at other similar moments with Mary, he would have given anything he possessed to be able to summon courage to seize and kiss her. But to do such a thing, even though they were riding out of view of the rest of the caravan, and even though the girl was pressing her horse nearer and nearer to the little bay mare, was as impossible to him as leaping the mare over the young moon! He shook himself savagely. His courage flagged, but his pride spurred on. He leaned from his saddle, reaching out a big, warm hand.

"What difference—would it—make, Mary?" he faltered, seizing her hand.

One of those inexplicable changes he had seen in her before, and that always enraged him with himself, swept over her now. With a quick fling and a high laugh she was a rod away at his touch.

"Why, of course it would make a difference, Prent," she cried, archly. "Wouldn't the whole train be held up while we were nursing you back to life. Think of the waste of time!"

With another laugh and a waving hand she sent her horse careening off over the prairie.

For a flash of time Prentiss Stanley was furiously angry with her. His pulses pounded. Then he touched the bay mare, and she lay close to the ground, ears back, tail out, hoofs flying. In half a minute she had overhauled the girl's gray gelding and they were running neck and neck. Stanley leaned over, at full gallop as they were. He caught the girl from her saddle, swung her to the neck of the bay, and bent his face to hers.

"You did it once too often, girl," he said. "Oh, Mary, Mary!"

He kissed her, then pulled up the bay and let Mary Greaves slip to the ground. She covered her face with her bent arm, and he thought she was crying.

But he could not help that. He could not help anything she thought or felt about him. He could not help it if this was the sudden, unexpected, undesired end of everything for him—he had kissed her!

Smiling a little, he rode ahead and caught the gray, that had stopped to nibble after the race was over. Suddenly a horse rushed up and came to a stop in a cloud of gravel and dust.

"Now, that time I caught you, you sneakin' whelp!" Zeb Benton's voice cried. "Abductin', eh? You're a jailbird!"

He tumbled from his horse, landing at the bay mare's head, and seized Stanley's bridle rein. Mary, startled, amazed, and uncomprehending, stepped aside so that she could see what he would do. But she did not see, for his horse separated them. She heard the report of a heavily-loaded Derringer and she screamed.

"Zeb Benton! Don't you dare! Prent didn't——"

But Prent Stanley came pitching to the ground. Zeb Benton kicked viciously at the prostrate body, caught his horse, and swung up.

"Come on, Mary," he said. "It's lucky they's somebody here to look out for you!"

He started toward her, catching the rein of her horse as he came. Mary Greaves flashed past him.

"You unspeakable cur!" she cried. "Oh, Prent! Prent! Honey mine!"

"Well, dog my cats—you ain't takin' up with him after *that?*" Zeb looked at her in amazement.

"Ride for help, you fool!" the girl screamed at him, raising young Stanley's head to her lap, and tearing frantically at his shirt, which was stained red with his blood.

"D'ye mean that, Mary?" Benton queried, scowling in bewilderment.

"I mean it, as you shall see if you don't hurry!"

Benton pulled his horse back with an oath of amazement and fright, for Mary had taken Prent Stanley's pistol from its holster and with a steady hand she was leveling it. The black muzzle of the gun came down rapidly, and there was something in the glint of the eyes behind it that warned the bully. With a savage wrench he pulled his horse around and set off at a gallop for the distant dust line that marked the passing of the caravan, a mile or so away.

Mary Greaves, with a sob, turned to Prent Stanley. He was looking up at her and the faintest smile was on his lips.

"I ain't sorry I kissed—you—Mary," he said.

As it turned out, Stanley had been stunned but not badly hurt. Benton's slug had glanced on a rib, making a nasty and painful wound, and breaking the bone, but doing no other injury. Nothing Mary could do would induce Prent to make complaint against his assailant, or to carry the affair any farther. Benton, badly frightened, had reported that Stanley had been accidentally shot when they were firing at a prairie dog, and this was the story accepted by the rest of the train. Zeb, however, kept strictly out of the way thereafter for several days. Within a week his victim was riding again, insisting that Judge Greaves's wagon was fully enough loaded without having him to carry farther.

Meantime, the caravan had reached the Big Blue and five days had been spent in building a log raft on which to ferry the wagons of the train across the stream, swollen bank-full by summer rains. This ferryage was the worst the party had encountered, and it was only due to the able management of Colonel Russell and Captain Donner, and the herculean labors of the men in the train that the crossing was accomplished.

IT WAS on the evening of the last day of the crossing that the incident occurred that finally exhausted the patience of the party with Zebulon Benton. To do him justice, he had used his enormous strength to good advantage in the tremendous task of getting the wagons over the ferry, and for once had worked willingly and faithfully. But work made him tired, and when he was tired he became cross and surly.

Almost the last wagon was on the raft at four o'clock that afternoon. The raft was constructed of two enormous logs, hollowed out, fastened into parallel positions ten feet apart, and then bridged with lighter logs which formed the deck of the crude ferry. On the far bank of the river the grade up to the country level was short but very steep and several awkward spills had occurred in landing the wagons. The one now on the boat was a badly loaded affair, with one side of its cargo much heavier than the other. Its wheels were in bad shape also. But it was gotten safely aboard the ferry and safely pulled across. Under Captain Donner's direction a log chain was fastened to its tongue then, and two yoke of oxen above on the bank began straining to drag it up the slope.

Zeb Benton was on the ferry, wet to his waist, his hands torn and his face dripping with perspiration. Prent Stanley, on the bank, was watching the unloading, for the moment assisting Captain Donner.

"She'll list overboard if you don't swing her over to the right!" Stanley called to Captain Donner, who was above him.

Zeb Benton, thinking he was being addressed, dropped his hands and looked up.

"Swing her over?" he yelled, angrily. "How in time am I goin' to swing her over?"

Stanley glanced at him.

"I was telling Captain Donner," he called back, simply.

Zeb, tired, sulky, and tempery, suddenly loosed his hold on the left front wheel of the wagon and began moving forward to leap to the bank on which Stanley sat.

"I'll teach you to shet yer yap!" he shouted.

At that moment his foot struck a log that had become loosened during the day. It rocked free. Its movement was just sufficient to release a second log, strained by the weight of the wagon; this second log rolled, the wagon lurched and, with a loud crash, its wheel collapsed. Instantly the whole forward load in the bed smashed down on that corner, the near log canoe filled with water, and before anyone could move the wagon heeled over into ten feet of muddy water, carrying Zebulon Benton with it.

Zeb came up mad with fury. The others were all rushing toward the spot to see what might be done, and nobody noticed him. He caught up a short knotted limb, broke it against a rock with one tremend-

ous blow, and started for Prent Stanley.

The latter, standing near one of Colonel Russell's lieutenants, heard the rush and one of Zeb's characteristic oaths, turned, and seeing the club aimed at him and descending in a sweeping curve, instinctively leaped aside to protect his wounded chest. Zeb's blow fell heavily—full on the exposed head of the young man beyond Stanley. The victim dropped to the ground without a cry.

Before the others could realize what had happened or interfere, Stanley, not yet wholly recovered from his bullet wound, sprang on Benton, catching his throat with both hands. Benton plunged like a wounded bull, dashing the lighter man about him and raining blows on his chest and head. But Stanley, even under the storm of blows, clung on desperately, and presently they fell. By that time others had come up and the two were promptly separated.

The innocent victim of this onslaught still lay stretched unconscious on the ground. Aflame with righteous indignation, Colonel Russell, a powerful old man, and Captain Donner, tall, stalwart and of tremendous strength, seized Zeb Benton's arms, pinned him against a tree, and curtly commanded the others to tie him there. In a thrice he was trussed up like a chicken for the baking, and there he was left, foaming with an incoherent and unreasoning rage, while Prentiss Stanley and the wounded man were taken to one of the wagons and a doctor in the party given charge of them.

At eight o'clock that night, after the leaders of the party had held a consultation, a gathering of all in the train was called.

Colonel Russell, following his rule as leader, rose and called them all to order.

"Members of the train," he said, solemnly, "on this afternoon an assault occurred which was uncalled for and inexcusable. Samuel Dodge, one of our most faithful young men, is seriously hurt and Prentiss Stanley, still suffering from the results of an accident a week since, has been badly injured, by the guilty man. This man has been a source of annoyance and trouble to the caravan since we started.

"We have reached a conclusion as to what should be done in this case. It is an aggravated one. Some of us were in favor of an extreme penalty. But the majority favor expulsion of Benton from the train. Those who agree to this will please raise their right hands."

Every hand was raised. Colonel Russell looked about him gravely.

"Expulsion is agreed upon Zebulon Benton." Two men led the surly and scowling youth forward. "It is the judgment of this party that you be expelled from its midst. You will leave it tonight, finally and forever. The penalty for failure to comply with this unanimous decision in your case will be death at daybreak!"

Chapter V

GATHERING CLOUDS

WE ARE now on the Platte, two hundred miles from Fort Laramie. Our journey so far has been pleasant. Indeed, if I do not experience something far worse than what I have yet done I shall say the trouble is all in getting started. I never could have believed we could travel so far with so little difficulty."

So Mrs. George Donner wrote on June 16th, sending the letter eastward by two trappers homeward bound from the Oregon country.

On the seventeenth Colonel Russell was taken violently ill and on the following day was so sick that he was compelled to resign his position as leader of the train. Captain Donner, who had been acting under him, resigned at the same time, in order to give the new leader a free hand. By unanimous consent Governor Boggs was chosen leader.

On June 27th, the party reached Fort Bernard, a small fur trading post ten miles east of Fort Laramie. It was at Laramie that the party had planned to stop for several days to repair their wagons and make final preparations for the long pull through the mountains, now looming nearer and nearer with every mile. But at Bernard a trader met the train with a sober face.

"You the leader?" he asked, curtly, of Governor Boggs.

"I am, sir."

"Heard the Indian news?"

"We have heard nothing startling."

"Well, get ready to. The Sioux are out in war-paint on Laramie Plain. Any minute now they will strike at the Crows. The Crows have sent runners to their old allies, the Snake Indians, and the whole kit and bilin' will be in a ruckus before your train can get five miles, I'm afraid."

Governor Boggs was grave. "That is

bad news, friend. What would you suggest?"

"Why, I'll tell you that, too," the man replied. "Fort Laramie will be the center of the storm for a while, until one party or another is driven back a piece. If I was runnin' this outfit I'd put up here at Bernard for a spell to see which way the wind blows."

"You don't think we could get through by crowding, do you?" Governor Boggs asked. "We are behind our schedule now by about ten days, owing to the flood stage we found at the Big Blue. If we don't go on quickly——"

Prentiss Stanley interrupted.

"Couldn't go on very far, Governor," he said, in his slow, drawling fashion.

"Couldn't? And why not, sir?" the leader demanded sharply.

"You can see for yourself that there aren't four pair of wheels in the train that would stand hurrying."

"Stanley is right, Governor," Captain Donner interjected.

The post agent shrugged.

"Suit yourselves, gents," he said, dryly. "But if my wheels was shaky I'd camp. Rather lose a week than a lot o' womenfolks!"

The bad news went down the line of the train and heads were shaken sadly at the prospect. But there was nothing for it but to make the best of a bad condition.

Captain Donner estimated that they would be fortunate to get past the Rockies before the early snows—and after that they still had to face the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

TWO days later news came from Laramie that emigrants had best proceed at once. The message was not explained, but Governor Boggs, plainly anxious to hasten on, called off all further repair work and ordered an advance. On the first of July, therefore, all but four wagons, moved on to Laramie.

There the general manager of the fur company, after a conference with the glum, silent, scowling, and war-paint besmeared Sioux chiefs, advised that the party stay at Laramie, behind the closed gates of the fort.

"I propose that we move at daybreak," said Judge Greaves, with quite dignity, "We did not start upon an expedition to Fort Laramie, but to California."

This saying of the judge's spread rapidly through the train and became a sort of byword among the emigrants. Long before the day began to tinge the eastern sky with pink the long train was on its way.

All day long the anxious watchers, urging their oxen forward as rapidly as possible, saw Indians in the distance, sometimes in groups of eight or ten, more often in small bands of twenty or thirty. Once or twice a few impudent young braves rode almost within rifle range, weaving in and out, circling around the head of the caravan, and uttering hair-raising yells. In the evening the party drove until there was just enough time before darkness to make camp.

Then the wagons were formed into a great circle—each tongue rolled under the rear of the wagon ahead, and a light one left at an angle so that it could be moved forward when all the stock had been watered and driven in, thus completing the circle. Guards were posted and every precaution taken. But the night, during which some of the women remained awake most of the long hours, passed without alarm and before daybreak the caravan was once again on the move.

Three such forced marches carried the train almost seventy miles, an astonishing record considering the state of the roads and the steepness of the grades encountered. Thereafter the marches were easier, although the apprehension of the leaders to get on impelled all to do their utmost.

On the nineteenth of July the banks of the Little Sandy were reached, where the California trail left that to Oregon. Here four large companies were found encamped, most of them bound for Oregon, and here it was that Governor Boggs and a large number of the party with which the Donners and Judge Greaves had been traveling since leaving Independence, said their farewells.

Late that night Prentiss Stanley, making a last round of the camp to see that everything was in order and that the stock were grazing quietly, heard hoofbeats from the west. He stopped, waited a moment, and presently hailed a rider.

"Hello, there!" he called. "You're in a hurry."

The man reined up beside Stanley.

"I'm looking for a California party from Illinois," he said, in a gruff, hesitating voice.

"All right," Stanley replied. "I'm that party."

"Are you Captain Donner?"

"No. He's asleep. Can I take the word?"

"Well, you might. Who are you?"

"Name is Stanley."

"That's all right, I guess," the man answered promptly. "Got a chew with you?"

The man was dressed in a suit made of some untanned skin, and wore his hair long—a fashion of the day, especially among frontiersmen. He rode very lightly, on a high, raw-boned horse which did not give any evidences of having been riden far that day. It was difficult in the starlight to discern much of his appearance, but that he was a hesitating, indirect sort of person was evident. Prent Stanley disliked the man and intuitively felt a distrust of him.

The fellow eased over in his saddle and looked down at Stanley.

"I come from Lansford Hastings," he began. "Know about him, I reckon?"

It was almost an idle question, for Lansford W. Hastings was one of the most famous explorers of that immediate time.

"Hastings? Yes, I've heard of him."

"Wal, four or five of your party rode ahead of you a few weeks past, didn't they? Said they did, anyhow. They took up with Hastings last Wednesday and told him Captain Donner's party was one of the last leavin' Independence. Hastings says you won't get over the Sierras if you don't push along. So he sent me back to tell you about his new cut-off."

"Well?" Stanley prompted, when the man paused.

"Well, it runs south of the Great Salt Lake, instead of around by Fort Hall and the headquarters of Ogden's River. It'll save you about two hundred miles."

"Is the road blazed?"

"No, it ain't. Hasting's only been over it-twict himself. But he says tell Captain Donner he'll wait for your party at Fort Bridger and guide you through for two hundred dollars, dollar a mile for each mile you save."

"All right. Want to put up with the train tonight?"

"No, I'll be ridin'."

"Where to, this time of night?"

"Oh, I got to ride along."

"Suit yourself."

The man hesitated a moment, opened his lips to speak, checked the impulse, and quite abruptly turned his horse's head and rode back along the road he had come.

The incident had a peculiar color, but Stanley could see nothing tangible to object to. Therefore, early in the morning he wakened Captain Donner and delivered the message. The captain frowned as he heard it, surprised by the news and puzzled by it, too, but pleased at the prospect of shortening the long road. He sent Stanley to waken and summon Judge Greaves and one or two others of the older men, but by the time they reached his wagon Captain Donner had made up his mind.

"I believe we should change our course for Fort Bridger," he said. "Two hundred miles would save us almost three weeks of travel at our present rate. We had best call a meeting of the company."

The meeting opened by electing Captain Donner leader of the caravan, even before he delivered his message.

Thereafter Donner repeated what the messenger had told Stanley. There was a sharp discussion. Several opposed the change of route, on the ground that it was risky to leave the beaten track. But the leader was for the plan and the majority followed him. Just as he was to put the question to a vote, according to the custom of the train, his wife, to the surprise of everyone present, asked to be heard.

"I'd like to ask Mr. Stanley what he thinks," she said, quickly.

Prent Stanley, embarrassed by being thus suddenly called upon, rose awkwardly.

"I don't know what to think, Mrs. Donner," he said, slowly.

"Were you favorably impressed by the messenger? Do you think he meant honestly by us?"

"Why, yes and no. I didn't like his looks, but he seemed honest enough."

"If you were leader, what would you do—follow this message?"

"No," Stanley answered promptly.

"Why not, Stanley?" Captain Donner demanded.

"Well, now, that's the worst of it, Captain," Prent returned, in some confusion. "I don't know why—I just wouldn't take the new route."

Several laughed good-humoredly at this, but the more impatient growled audibly that they couldn't be influence by the superstitions of a boy. When the vote was taken there was nine who opposed the change of route, forty-three who favored it. This was, at the time, about the full voting strength of the party. The die was cast.

Two hours later the train was on its way, turning south at the crossing of the river, the pioneers elated at the prospect of a better and nearer road to their goal.

IVE days later the Donner party reached Fort Bridger and learned that Hastings had gone forward as guide to a large train a week before. His agent seemed puzzled by Captain Donner's story of the messenger who had come to the Little Sandy to meet them.

"Hastings might have sent somebody, all right," he said. "He's always doing that. But I can't understand him not leaving any word for you here. I don't know what to say, Mr. Donner."

On the twenty-sixth of July, in spite of Mrs. Donner's repeated objections, the party moved on over the road the agent roughly sketched for them. On the third of August the Webber River, in the Utah Mountains was reached, and there a letter was found in a cleft stick between the road, addressed to "Emigrants Bound for California." It was from Hastings, advising all who came that way to wait for his return from his present trip.

"I have found a new road from this point to the Lake," the letter said, "which I consider superior to any. Parties cannot find it unguided, so wait here."

The upshot of the long discussion that followed the finding of this missive was a suggestion made by Prent Stanley.

"If you don't want to turn back, folks," he offered, in his hesitating way, "you can go into camp here and make repairs and rest the stock and limber up, and I'll ride on and find Hastings and get this thing straight."

It was a long speech for Stanley, and made an instant hit with the train. He was given two companions, and early on the following morning they set out. For eight days the party waited; then Stanley returned, having become separated from his two associates, who had come back before, reporting him lost.

"Found Hastings," he said briefly, when the emigrants, greatly excited, clustered around him. "He wouldn't come back. I told him our fix and he finally took me up into the Wahsatch Mountains and pointed out our road. I've come over it part of the way."

"Can we make it?" a dozen asked.

"It's a poor chance."

"We'll take it!" they shouted.

Prentiss Stanley, protesting at every mile of the way, showed the leader as best he could where their route must lead. Captain Donner, courageous, able and tireless as he was, could not overmaster insurmountable difficulties. At the end of the first day a dense forest of quaking asp was encountered through which the men of the party worked for one full day before a wagon could pass. Half a day's travel thereafter led them to a seemingly impassable canyon over which, after some discussion, it was decided to build a road. Six days of grueling work; then a small party overtook the Donners and joined in the task. Two days later the canyon was surmounted, but the road led into a mountain valley from which there was no outlet.

Day after day this sort of hopeful starting, terrible effort, and bleak discouragement were the fate of the caravan. Finally a trapper chanced by who agreed to guide them over a mountain range into the Salt Lake Valley. There followed five days of such traveling as made their terrible experiences of the past three weeks seem tame by comparison. Weary, discouraged, sick, and with their animals almost dead from the terrific strain, they finally dragged themselves over a summit and moved slowly down into the basin of the Great Salt Lake. They had reached a point which they had expected to make in twelve days from the Little Sandy, and it had taken them thirty!

Their supplies were getting low. Their oxen and equipment were in terrible condition. Many of their number were sick, most of them discouraged; a few of them were almost panic-stricken. In such plight Captain Donner called for volunteers to ride ahead to Sutter's Fort, in California, and engage a train to bring out supplies, animals and wagons to meet the caravan somewhere on the road and to insure what now seemed a doubtful issue, their eventual arrival in California.

Prentis Stanley was the first to volunteer. One other man was chosen to accompany him. Stanley had half an hour in which to make his preparations—and two minutes with Mary Greaves.

CHAPTER VI

THE RIDE FOR HELP

Y THE reckoning of Captain George Donner, Prentiss Stanley and his companion, Joe McClintock, had five hundred miles between them and Sutter's Fort when they left the unfortunate caravan. His supposition was

that the two horsemen, with a light packmare to carry their provisions and with the urge of the party's danger upon them, would average forty miles a day, reaching the fort in less than two weeks. As the wagon train was then advancing at the rate of twelve and fifteen miles a day, it seemed probable that the much needed supplies could be returned to meet them within three weeks, somewhere in the eastern part of the present State of Nevada.

As a matter of fact the two riders for succor were almost seven hundred and fifty miles from the fort, the first point at which human aid could be obtained, and the road was in such condition that an average of forty miles proved extravagant. Stanley was only too fully aware in what danger his friends stood and he could be depended on to make the long and hazardous ride for supplies in the shortest time possible. Had his intuitive advice been taken and the old wagon road followed from the Little Sandy it seemed likely to him now that the Donner party would have been already near the borders of California, with the early snows possible, rather than certain, dangers.

As he rode steadily westward, musing on the prospect, he realized that the nip of mornings and evenings and the palpable frost sting in the air presaged snow, not only for the caravan but even for himself and his companion.

Again and again there came to his mind his interview with the strange horseman late that night in the camp at the Oregon Trail junction on the Little Sandy. Even then he had suspected the messenger and the news he brought. His suspicions were increased when, finding Hastings, the explorer, in the Salt Lake Basin, Hastings, he learned had sent neither the messenger nor the message!

Who could have sent him, and with what purpose?

There was but one answer—Prentiss Stanley had seen that. Yet the thought that Zebulon Benton, desperate, vengeful, surly, and hard as he was, could have taken such a means of revenge, jeopardizing the safety and lives of the whole party, including the helpless women and children, seemed incredible. How much simpler and more direct, if Zeb Benton thirsted for revenge on Stanley, to have ambushed him and shot him, at long range, riding away afterward secure in the knowledge that, even if he were ever suspected, it would be impossible to prove anything.

Zeb Benton's mind was a clumsy one, traveling slowly to a point and then fixing itself tenaciously there. To delay or perhaps lose the whole party, including Stanley, the leaders, and Mary Greaves, the woman whom he considered had jilted him might have appealed to him as a more telling and masterly vengeance. In any event, whatever his mental processes, Stanley was sure that Zeb Benton and the man on the tall, rangy sorrel who had brought the message to the Little Sandy would some day be found to have been associated.

The riders made their first night camp about twenty-eight miles west. Stanley's purpose had been to follow the road northwesterly across the Salt Lake Basin until from some eminence he could get the lay of the land and if possible strike due west, saving as much distance as he could.

Early the following morning, however, an Indian and a trapper met them and, proving friendly and interested in the mission of the two emigrants, hobbled their pack animals and rode five miles back over the way they had come to point out to Stanley the beginning of what they called the Blue Rock cut-off. This singular piece of good fortune put Stanley and McClintock on what proved to be almost an airline into and across the center of the territory now known as Nevada, and for a week they traveled steadily and rapidly. Low mountain ranges, beautiful grassy little meadows and valleys and several long semi-arid desert reaches were passed and then they began their entry into the Sierras.

For several days the two had been picking up indications that some sort of party was moving ahead of them. Idly, as men will do on a long horseback trip, they had begun figuring out the size and character of the cavalcade ahead and had decided that there were at least three horsemen, one mounted on an unshod pony, all traveling light and driving several head of unshod animals, some of them packed.

Joe McClintock, Stanley's companion, was a Quaker, and although, as Mr. Greaves had once observed, "he did not practice his profession steadily," he used the archaic form of speech of the sect. He was a mild, gentle, pacific youth, clumsy of movement and slow, but very muscular and with hands and wrists powerful beyond belief.

"Mac could twist a man's head way round behind, but, pshaw, he wouldn't harm a fly unless the fly hit him first!" a wag in the caravan had once said of him.

McClintock had been the first to note that part of the load carried by the outfit preceding them seemed to be packed in bot-

tles and that there was apparently an effort being made to reduce that share of the load as rapidly as human capacity would permit. At every point where a night camp had been made at least one, and sometimes two or three, empty flasks were to be found, and here and there they had been tossed beside the road enroute.

On the afternoon of the tenth day—they were well into the mountains now—McClintock, who was riding ahead, dismounted and began to investigate tracks beside the trail.

"If our friends entertain themselves on the way as they seem to have done here," he observed, dryly, "thee may have to play surgeon when we overtake them, friend Prentiss."

Stanley, also dismounted and tightening pack ropes, looked up.

"Why?"

"Thee can see there was a ruckus here." The Quaker pointed.

Unquestionably the party ahead had engaged in some sort of altercation, for the ground was torn up with boot tracks and blood had spattered leaves and moss rather copiously. There were tracks of mocassins, but evidently only such as one man would have made. McClintock studied them.

"The red man seems to have stood back and watched the brethren," he said, humorously. "Mayhap he was waiting to see who should be the best man to fall in with."

Stanley laughed carelessly, although the signs were not propitious ones to him.

"If they follow our road we'll know more about them before long," he said.

Although the trail freshened hourly, the travelers made camp again that night without overtaking the others. At daybreak Prent wakened shivering, to find that a light flurry of snow had fallen. With the high mountains still ahead of him and his companion, with their supplies rapidly decreasing, and with trails and roads wholly unknown to either of them, snow here was a blow. Worse was to come.

A FEW minutes later Stanley roused McClintock hurriedly.

"Are you sure you hobbled the pack mare last night?"

"Yea."

"She's gone this morning."

McClintock sat up with a jerk, rubbing his eyes with one fist and reaching for his boots with the other. They made a hurried search, but the snow had covered all tracks. After a sketchy breakfast Stanley rode out on the trail; in twenty minutes he came back, his face grim.

"Indians, I guess," he said. "It is fortunate that our pack is light."

"What does thee mean?" McClintock stared.

"We'll have to carry our supplies on our horses. I found the pack mare a mile or so up the grade, beside the trail, with her throat cut."

McClintock took the news queerly. He had been taught to forbear, and his early teaching was hard to forget. Harder it was to receive such information as this—pressed as the two riders were already—and "turn the other cheek." The Quaker stood silently, his arms hanging. Presently his great hands began to knot, his face to redden.

"Does thee think we could overtake the band that did it?" he asked, in a strained voice. "I should like to have one minute with the guilty."

"We'll see, Mac," Stanley answered, noncommittally. "Better push along, anyhow."

They divided their pack into two bundles, slung one on either saddle, and rode on. McClintock, a man of one idea, was watching for Indians or the signs of Indians. But Prent Stanley, though keeping his own counsel from the force of habit, was morally certain that the man who had thus wantonly slain their extra horse was not a member of a band of Indians. In the blood-stained snow under the dead animal's neck, he had plainly seen the print of a heeled States boot such as no Indian warrior wore. Like McClintock, he kept a wary look-out, but it was for the party advancing somewhere there ahead, and of that party he began to think he would recognize at least one and possibly two members.

About two o'clock that afternoon their horses, stumbling and straining up under their now increased burdens, followed the trail into a steep and narrow box-canyon. What appeared to be an impassable heligate, not more than ten feet from wall to wall, loomed ahead. The trail followed the bottom of the canyon for half a mile, then broke up to the left onto a ledge which shortly became a shelf less than three feet wide, a fault in the wall of the gorge that rose sheer about them for a

hundred feet and fell sheer away below to the stream-bed.

Both of the riders had dismounted and were walking, Stanley leading his horse ahead, and McClintock bringing up the rear. The Quaker, his attention fixed on the trail at his feet, suddenly bumped into the flanks of Stanley's horse, which had stopped with a jerk of the head. The Quaker looked up quickly.

"Thee might sing out before thee halts that way, friend Stanley!" he protested in his mildest tones.

Prent Stanley laughed shortly, a laugh that had very little humor in it.

"I might, Mac," he replied, "but this time I had something else on my mind. Look here!"

McClintock craned to see.

"Father William Penn!" he cried, aghast.

Surrounded by a great heap of débris and rocks, a boulder weighing twenty or thirty tons stood on their trail, its outermost point wedged into the opposite wall of the narrow canyon. As completely as though it had never been, the ledge-like path was closed forever.

McClintock took off his broad-brimmed hat and scratched his head ruefully.

"Divine Providence might have postponed that landslide a few hours more," he observed.

Prent scowled.

"Nothing divine about this blockade," he said. "Unless God has taken to using giant powder. See here!" And he held up a bit of rock at his feet, one side of which was seared and blackened by the breath of burning explosive.

McClintock, opening his mouth to speak, looked up suddenly. Then he dropped his eyes to his companion's face and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Don't turn, Prent," he cautioned. "Above you, beyond that outcrop on the right, somebody watches!"

Prent swung about abruptly and glanced up the canyon. No need for him to look at the face of that man ambushed above. His voice choked with his anger.

"You win again, Zeb Benton!" he cried, his long restrained impatience under provocation kindling into a rage he could not control. "You've balked us and delayed us and endangered the lives of our party, even the women and children. But you can mark one thing—we're going through to California in spite of you, and if the time ever comes when any of us face you, God help you!"

Without word or sign Zeb Benton and his companion disappeared. Stanley was too angry to think of their movements, but Joe McClintock listened, trying to determine whether they were riding on or were still ambuscaded somewhere up the gorge. He heard nothing.

"What will thee do now, friend Prent?" he asked, turning to their own predicament. "It's fair to say we'll not overpass that slide, so—Stanley!"

At the sharp exclamation his companion looked back to him.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"We're checked complete! Thee sees we cannot even turn about!"

This realization brought them both up cold. The ledge on which they and the two horses stood was so narrow that it was obviously impossible to wheel the animals. Not only that; the greatest skill would have to be employed if Stanley himself were to pass the horses and reach the place where McClintock stood. At first glance it appeared that their only recourse was to shoot their mounts, tumble the bodies into the chasm, and take up their journey afoot, seeking a detour around the canyon.

Prent Stanley, his wrath cooled, studied the situation for a moment with a frown. Then he laughed.

"Looks bad," he admitted, "but when things get bad enough they usually start getting better, I've noticed. Let's figure."

They figured, and the result of their conference was a decision to try backing the animals step by step to some turn on the trail wide enough to permit them to face their horses about. Inch by inch, then, talking to the animals to quiet them, and holding their heads firmly to steady them, they managed in the next hour to reach a bench several hundred yards down the gorge when the two weary and now nervous horses could find footholds and twist painfully about. It was dark in the canyon when they finally reached it, and they made camp.

THE delay of half a day proved to be the beginning of their tragedy. For three days and nights they were pressing onward most of the time, twisting and winding about in canyon beds, scaling high mountains both to escape from impassable hell-gates and to seek

some sign of their road, and walking a great deal to save their fast-weakening mounts. McClintock's horse, in fact, was getting almost unfit for travel, and McClintock himself was suffering from a badly inflamed arm, the inflammation arising from a scratch he had received in that desperate climb out of the box-canyon. Their food was practically gone, they were off their road, water-holes were sometimes far to seek, and, to top their miseries with peril, the snow was beginning to fly again intermittently, sweeping down on them before violent and penetrating winds and twice forcing them to a temporary camp.

On the twentieth of September, three weeks out from the caravan, McClintock began to show signs of fever and extreme weakness. Lack of nourishing food and of proper dressing for his badly wounded arm had combined with the rigors of the weather and the terrible grind of their travel to render him a very sick man. Stanley, with the responsibility of hastening on and getting back to the succor of the emigrants as his first duty, did all he could for his companion. McClintock never complained, and as far as he was able did his share of the work. But his strength ebbed rapidly.

On that evening something occurred to give him, at least temporarily, a new lease of life. They came, quite unexpectedly and suddenly, on their lost trail.

Instantly both men and horses seemed to revive appreciably. The animals nickered and turned into the welcome path with quickened steps. McClintock straightened in his saddle and Prent Stanley relieved his feelings with a wild "Kansas" yell. They made a late camp and started on very early in the morning, as soon as they could see. Although his arm was paining him until sweat stood out on his face, McClintock pressed on gamely.

Stanley was alert for tracks that might indicate that Zeb Benton and his quarrelsome crew were ahead of them once more, but he saw none. Apparently the renegades had either pushed on rapidly after convincing themselves that they had checkmated Stanley, or else had struck northward toward the Indian country. Their absence was no loss. Stanley was relieved to have missed them, for every delay now would mean the loss of precious hours.

About eight o'clock an unexpected trouble fell upon him: Joe McClintock, riding ahead, pitched suddenly from his saddle in a faint.

Stanley leaped to his aid, but half the morning was consumed in frantic efforts, with the crudest appliances, to reduce the inflammation. Steaming clothes alternating with cold presses gave the sufferer some relief, but he was in no shape to move. The Quaker had won a warm place in Prent Stanley's heart; it sickened him to see the agony of his companion and to be unable to do anything that would bring material relief.

An hour after they had resumed their journey all thought of McClintock's condition was driven from their minds. They had just forded a creek and were climbing the far bank when a clatter of hoofs rose behind them and they heard hoarse, angry voices, thick with liquor.

The two pathfinders pulled up.

"Guess we're in for it," Stanley said, gloomily. "Better ride to one side of the trail."

They wheeled their horses, one on either side of their road, and sat listening and watching alertly. Almost at once the quarrelsome tones of Zeb Benton reached them.

"The' ain't goin' to be no whackin' up!" he cried. "The man that draws the low card stays behind—that's what! The others ride on."

Another voice, vaguely familiar to Prent, rose in protest.

"That man'll die, then!" he complained, bitterly. "An' you're a better card-player than what we are, Zeb."

Evidently Benton stopped his horse.

"What do you mean by that, Rogers?" he shouted. "Accusin' me of cheatin', are ye?"

"No. But 't ain't fair to——"

The rest of the speech was lost in the clatter they made.

Prent was thinking rapidly. That there were three, possibly four men, in the party behind, seemed evident. That they were all drunk was probable. Given an even break he and McClintock could have accounted, perhaps, for all of the drunken ruffians, but with McClintock weak and suffering the odds seemed tragically uneven.

Meantime the Benton gang moved into sight below. Benton led, slouching heavily on his gaunt and weary horse. He was followed by a nondescript and hangdog white, an emaciated and savage looking Indian, and last by the messenger Prent had encountered on the banks of the Little Sandy. For a second the young emigrant clutched the stock of his long-barreled rifle closer and locked his jaws, seeing red. But he did not move.

The men climbing the trail were continuing their wrangle and Benton was growing more and more threatening and surly. When almost between Prent Stanley and McClintock he checked his horse, swung around in the saddle, and dropped his heavy horse-pistol down before him, covering his followers.

"This is where we draw!" he cried, peremptorily. "I'm sick of crawling along this a-way and we need somebody's horse. Climb down!"

For the first time Prent Stanley saw that the others were unarmed, and then he discovered a rifle and an extra pistol strapped to Benton's saddle. Somewhere along the trail their leader had taken the precaution to render his renegades helpless, which explained why Zeb, obviously hated by his train, dared still to ride coolly ahead of them.

AT THEIR leader's command the other three had slid to the ground; now they stood weaving by their horses, watching Benton fearfully, the lips of the two whites twitching nervously in their pale faces. With a laugh he threw his own pistol into its holster, drew out a pack of dirty cards, and dropped to the ground.

"One draw each," he said, tersely. "The man with the low card gives up his horse and his blankets and the rest goes on. Are you ready?"

They looked from one to another helplessly, found no comfort in company, and nodded.

"All right. Sit down."

They crouched in their places, the Indian at Zeb's left, the hang-dog stranger in a coonskin cap next, and at Benton's right the messenger to the Little Sandy. Scarcely breathing, Prent Stanley leaned forward to watch.

The ruffian in the coonskin cap raised a whining voice.

"Ain't we a-goin' to shuffle them cards afore the draw, Mr. Benton?" he asked, piteously.

Benton snarled an oath at him. But the two others chimed in, the Indian with a stolid and menacing grunt, the late messenger shrilly.

"You bet we are!" he cried.

Zeb shrugged heavy shoulders, and tossed the pack to the ground.

Coonskin Cap shuffled, his fingers trembling so that he dropped several cards, at which Benton cursed him cordially. The Indian cut. Then the messenger. Zeb Benton watched, not his men, but their fingers and the cards. When they had shoved the pack across to him, he reached for it carelessly. It was true, as one of his men had said: he was a better card-player than they.

Coolly, adeptly, but with exasperating slowness, he picked up the cards between thumb and lower fingers, lightly touching the backs with his first. With the other hand he trimmed the deck. Then he looked over their heads.

"Ain't any of us goin' to have horses if we don't watch out!" he said, almost pleasantly.

Mechanically the three followed his eyes to where their horses, taking advantage of the stop to feed, were crowding up the trail ahead, one of them several paces distant. The horses were all right; that was instantly apparent. The three men looked back quickly, startled at the interruption and rendered apprehensive by the gravity of the scene in which they played. They had good reason to be apprehensive, as Prent Stanley could have told them.

For, with lightning passes that seemed impossible to so dull and heavy-witted a man, Zeb Benton had double-cut the pack!

His face was impassive, however, and his eyes and hand steady as he fanned the cards and held them out. Uncomfortably the three drew, the Indian first.

He disclosed a five of diamonds.

Coonskin Cap drew, uttered a sobbing sigh of relief, and showed a king.

The messenger wet his lips as he drew and when he had looked at his card it fell from his nerveless fingers. The tray of clubs!

Benton laughed shortly, passed the pack to the Indian, and carelessly chose a card. He started violently as he looked at it. It was the three of hearts.

The messenger laughed suddenly, in wild relief.

"Me and you draw again!" he shouted.

Zeb Benton, knowing instantly that he had blundered in stacking the cards, took them from the Indian roughly, thumbed them, and held them out again. The messenger drew a queen.

"Now you hold for me," Benton said, extending the pack. The man took them, his anxiety fighting with his relief at the character of his card. The chances were ten or twelve to one that Benton would

draw lower, and yet there was that one chance! He held out the pack.

Zeb Benton leaned forward quickly, chose a card without the slightest trace of hesitation, and grinned at his opposite.

"Sorry, Rogers," he said, evenly. "You're elected."

He dropped on the ground before them the ace of diamonds.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF THE RIDE

AS Zeb Benton dropped the ace a desperate fear rushed over Rogers, the hulking messenger who had been sent back to meet the Donner party at the Little Sandy. With abandonment and slow starvation staring him in the face he suddenly lost all sense of caution and all dread of Zeb Benton. Roaring, he leaped for the other's throat, his hands claw-like. Instantly the four were embroiled.

Benton, throwing himself backward, reached for his gun, but the onrush of Rogers had been so precipitate that the gun was not drawn. Instead, for the second, all four men were overturned in a writhing mass. The first to extricate himself was the Indian. Characteristically he withdrew a few steps and stood stoically watching.

It was difficult to determine what course the man in the coonskin cap would take. His sympathies must have been with Rogers, fated to be left behind, but his anxiety to save himself by sacrificing the other and his terror of Zeb Benton combined to check him. So he clawed, kicked, and struck out, first at one and then at the other, meantime trying to pull himself free of the mêlée.

He was just about successful, and was scrambling frantically to loosen one foot that was caught in the tangle of arms and legs, when Zeb's pistol barked. Whether Benton had managed to work it free and fire it, or whether it fell and was set off accidentally was problematical. The result of the discharge, however, was instantly apparent. The unfortunate in the coonskin cap straightened from his knees, screamed, and pitched forward on his face.

The distraction gave Zeb Benton a moment's breathing space and he half rose and caught up the gun, clubbing it. In another second he would have dashed out Rogers's brains, in spite of the latter's desperate struggle for the mastery. Seeing that the critical moment had come, Prentiss Stanley stepped forward from his ambuscade a few feet above the fighters.

"Stop!" he shouted, his rifle trained on them.

The effect was magical. Zeb Benton, electrified, leaped to his feet and swung wildly around. Rogers, his intended victim, sat on his heels, staring ludicrously, his mouth open. The Indian, stolid and cold, shifted his eyes to the face of the newcomers and stood watching, like a figure in bronze.

Benton let fly a torrent of oaths, evidently trying to screw up his courage that had failed him—here in the presence of what he seemed to think was the supernatural. His words echoed awfully in the stillness. But they were cut short.

A great hand was clapped over his mouth and an arm of iron twitched his bull neck back. Joe McClintock, calmly growled in the blasphemer's ear.

"Thee better beware for thy soul, friend Benton!" he said. "Thee has enough on it without adding more. Sit down!"

Benton sat down, with a force that drove the breath out of his body. The pistol flew from his grasp and to the Indian's feet. The latter did not move a hair.

McClintock, grimacing with the pain in his left arm, looked up at Prentiss Stanley.

"What is thee going to do now, friend Prent?" he inquired.

Stanley came down the bank and stood over his enemy, the rifle lowered.

"I want to say a few words to Zeb Benton first," he replied.

For the moment he was off his guard, and that moment cost him the advantage he had held. Benton, sitting beside him, had recovered his wits and had realized that he was really dealing with flesh and blood. Bending forward, he seized the barrel of Stanley's rifle and twisted it.

The weapon was jerked from Stanley's hand and the butt, flung out with terrific force in the powerful hands of the desperate Benton, crashed against Joe McClintock's swollen arm. The blow was sufficient to have broken the bone; striking as it did the tortured and purpled flesh, it sent the Quaker tottering back with an animal cry of pain. His face was pulled awry, his back bent, and he pitched down, half-fainting.

In a flash the upper hand was Benton's; with that rifle swinging like a flail he menaced Stanley, roaring a blasphemous threat.

Prent stepped back, fumbling for his knife, but he was too slow to save himself. In another second he would have gone down with his head smashed beyond all repairing.

It was Joe McClintock who intervened. Almost dying of his agony, the Quaker still had his wits about him and his great strength of wrist and arm. Even as he fell he had squirmed over so that he was within reach of Benton's leg; as the outlawed emigrant swung the rifle aloft McClintock caught his ankle in a powerful grip and gave it a twisting jerk. Benton's blow fell short and the rifle stock was shattered on a rock.

For a breath the issue hung in the balance, for McClintock was exerting superhuman strength to cope with the leader of the ruffians; Prent Stanley was unarmed save for his Bowie knife, and there were still the skulking Indian and Rogers, the false messenger, to count. It was the Indian who moved first.

His knife was in his hand and he was crouching for a leap at Stanley when Rogers rose. In his two hands he held a rock; in a flash he had raised it and hurled it toward the savage. The red man leaped aside, grunted, and precipitately fled the field. Prent Stanley, uncertain as to Rogers's intentions, lowered his Bowie. The lying messenger of the Little Sandy shifted his gaze and a hot red burned through the leathery tan of his face.

"You saved my life," he said. "I didn't deserve it."

"Watch the Indian!" Prent cried, given no choice but to believe in the renegade's change of heart, and leaped to aid McClintock.

But he did not reach him. Zeb Benton, with his leg twisted until it seemed that the bone would snap, made one last desperate lunge. The Quaker's hold relaxed; he caught his breath in a gasp—then stiffened.

Benton, freed, dashed by Stanley, leaped for a horse, caught the saddle pommel and yelled. The animal started; Benton dragged himself up and began flogging it. In a moment they had disappeared on the western trail.

Stanley knelt by the side of his friend, indifferent now to everything else. McClintock clutched his hand, shuddered, and died. The poison, driven through his veins from the wounded arm, had reached the heart at last.

Prent looked up at the shamefaced Rogers.

"We'll bury him now," he said, simply, and they did.

Rogers took up a hand ax and blazed two big pines that raised their heads above the Quaker's last resting place.

"If you'll take me in," he added, then, facing Prent appealingly, "I'll try to make up to you for my orneriness."

"I'll take you. But if there is any trickery I won't waste time with words."

"There won't be no trickery or trouble with me, mister," he assured. "We better get along."

So, out of that encounter at the creek, Stanley rode forward with a loyal and beloved companion lost; his way cleared, for the moment, of the menace of Zeb Benton; and with a new and untried ally with a dark past.

"I got in a ruckus in the States," Rogers explained a day or so later, as they pressed steadily westward along the rude road. "I come on out West and met up with Benton this side of Fort Menton just a few weeks back. He had money and liquor and by that time I knew the country some. So I joined on with him. He sent me back to give you that message about changing your road, and told me it was straight. But I didn't take much stock in it."

"Why didn't you tell me that then?" Prent asked. "It would have saved our women folks some terrible hardships."

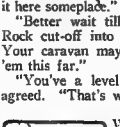
Rogers hung his head.

"Benton had me scared—and drunk," he confessed. "He said he'd make the West too hot for me if I didn't take orders."

"I've been thinking about that liquor," Prent said. "We have more of it than we ought to carry, and I think we'll cache it here someplace."

"Better wait till we get off this Blue Rock cut-off into the main wagon road. Your caravan may need it when we get 'em this far."

"You've a level head, Rogers," Prent agreed. "That's what we'll do."



TWO days later, quite suddenly, they emerged into the road. At the point there was a gigantic cliff of bluish rock, the landmark that had given the cut-off its name. In a cave on the side of this bluff they found a convenient shelf for the brandies and wines deserted by Benton. There they left them, under a cover of leaf-mould and rocks.

The expedient lightened the packs appreciably; thereafter they went forward more rapidly.

They were on the broad road now, not a highway but at least cleared, partially graded by the ceaseless grind of wheels upon it, and unmistakably plain before their eyes.

Stanley was losing a good deal of that vitality that had carried him so far; he was going more and more on sheer nerve. The renegade with him seemed made of toughened sinew and iron frame; he was tireless. He had become almost a bond slave to the young man, and no brother could have been more solicitious or self-sacrificing. Stanley tried to resist the man's unselfish offerings at times, but he was weak and the other was strong: moreover Stanley kept continually before his mind the urgent necessity of reaching the settlements and getting aid back to his friends.

They passed the timber-line on the thirtieth of September and found easier traveling. Next day they saw in the distance the signs of a camp of emigrants, and at noon they came up to these people. The emigrants worn and weary, their oxen mere skeletons, their supplies low, and several of their number left behind in shallow mountain graves. However, with characteristic generosity and heroism they gave Stanley and his companion two hearty meals, provided them with sufficient supplies to carry them through to the fort, and traded a sound horse for one which had gone very lame. Fed, helped and encouraged, Stanley and Rogers gave the party a grateful farewell and galloped on wastward.

Nothing now stood between Prentiss Stanley and the successful completion of the first and most difficult part of his task. To get supplies together at Sutter's Fort would be the work of only a few hours.

It was on the morning of the fourth that they came down out of the mountains into a grassy plain where early rains had already started a plentiful carpet of green. Out of this, about noon, they rose again into some low foothills and from the top of one of these saw the Sacramento Valley, spreading before them invitingly as must that land the spies of Israel saw—the land flowing with milk and honey. It seemed impossible, after all their vicissitudes, their perils, and their hardships, that the two were at the threshold of the Promised Land. Even Rogers, hardened old ruffian that he was, melted a little at the sight.

"It looks good enough to camp in, don't it, Stanley?" he asked, roughly.

"It is, from all reports," Prent replied. "But it will look better for me when I come into it with the caravan."

"I reckon," the older man said sententiously. He knew more of the perils of early winter in the mountains than Stanley did—more of them than Stanley even guessed.

They rode as rapidly as they could, not trying now to save their horses so jealously with the goal in sight. At four o'clock they topped another rise. For a moment Rogers, whose eyes were like an eagle's, hung on the summit.

"Looks like there's a feller down there that ain't any too happy," he observed. "Trouble of some sort, I'll be bound."

Stanley looked more closely and finally made out a speck on the floor of the valley beyond them, probably three or four miles away. On what Rogers based his conclusion that the man was in difficulties Stanley could not determine. But he was right. As the two came up to him they found him staggering in the saddle, lurched forward over the horn, and almost pitching off repeatedly as the horse stumbled and dragged forward. That both mount and rider were on the verge of collapse was evident. Prent touched his horse and the two men hastened a little.

Almost as they came up with the solitary stranger his horse completely lost its balance and went to its knees. Like a sack of meal the rider pitched from the saddle and lay where he fell prone on his face. Stanley and Rogers were at his side in another minute, had dismounted, and had turned him over. Both of them uttered an exclamation and started back.

It was Zebulon Benton.

A moment before Prent Stanley would have said that he would kill Zeb Benton on sight, no matter what his condition; and so faithful had Rogers become that it seemed likely he would have been ready to lend a hand. But this helpless clod lying there before them was not now Zeb Benton but a human being. With all the skill they had and with what haste they could make they revived him with spirits, raised him up, tied him to a horse, and started onward with him, one riding on either side. His mount they left behind, with a merciful bullet through its head.

Late that night they reached the outposts of the mystic land of California.

At nine o'clock they were inside the fort and Prent had turned his unfortunate townsman over to the care of an army doctor, had explained his mission to Sutter and his *alcalde* and had obtained prompt and generous assurances of help. When he had thanked Alcalde Sinclair, the principal official of the fort, the latter picked up a memorandum from his desk and ran through its leaves.

"We have messages or letters for several of the members of the Donner party," he said. "They have come in by way of Oregon or in the hands of horsemen. The only one of great importance appears to be that for a young man named Zebulon Benton. Do you know him?"

Prent Stanley nodded.

"He is here at the fort now."

"The man you brought in?"

"Yes."

"His news may help him toward recovery. His father died after your party left Springfield and left him a handsome legacy —his entire property, I believe. The message I have," the official continued, "instructs me to deliver certain legal papers and also to say to the heir, distinctly, that the inheritence comes to him 'with his father's forgiveness.'" Those are the words—'his father's forgiveness!'"

Chapter VIII

SNOW

PRENTISS STANLEY was sent to bed by Alcalde Sinclair at ten o'clock, in spite of his insistence that he spend the night working on preparations for his return to meet the train. The *alcalde* would not hear of such a program and promised to set his own men at the task early in the morning and to call Stanley at six.

The young messenger wakened with a start the next day to find the sun streaming straight into his windows and to learn that it was twelve o'clock. Five minutes later he was tearing into the *alcalde's* office, buttoning his shirt as he went and trying to control his wrath at the neglect of his wishes. The *alcalde* lay back in his chair and roared with laughter at the young man's perturbation.

"Overslept, hey?" he laughed, delightedly. "I should say you did; I've had two Indians under your windows all morning to keep noisy folks away from you. Sure you slept! Best thing in the world for you!"

"I ought to be much obliged, sir," Stanley answered, "but I was promising myself I'd get away by noon today—and it's that now!"

"Don't let that distress you, young fellow. Go down to the corrals and ask for Stock, the head teamster. Maybe he can help you off."

Stanley went, getting his first view of Sutter's Fort by daylight. This, the first and most important American settlement in the interior of California, was the adobe-walled center and capital of lands owned under grant from the Mexican Government by Captain John A. Sutter, a native of Switzerland, and a man drawn from his own country by his dreams of empire. Sutter's Fort was the first objective in the Western land of all emigrants, and Sutter met them all with generous treatment, kindly and usually helpful advice, and prompt assistance in distress.

The year 1846 had been the biggest for immigration that California had known, and Sutter's Fort was a very busy place. Stanley saw nearly two hundred wagons drawn up in the vicinity—their owners either resting up and repairing their outfits preparatory to moving on to their permanent locations or else off on horseback or in light wagons prospecting for desirable lands. Immigrant women and children were everywhere. Traders who had come up the Sacramento River from San Francisco, then a small but flourishing port for vessels coming around the Horn, were doing a thriving business. Indians were numerous. Also there were large numbers of Mexicans, busy at manual labor or else occupying positions of importance in the stores or offices of the fort.

Stanley's amazement was great, on reaching the corrals, to find the last few bales of supplies being lashed on to the tail-board of a big prairie schooner to which strong, sleek mules were being hitched, and about which were employes of the fort who informed him that these supplies were to leave at twelve-thirty to go east and meet the Donner party. Stock, a big man with a foghorn voice, was directing the work. He told Stanley that the latter was to have ten mules and fresh riding horses for himself and two Indian guides and was to leave at two o'clock to hasten on with essentials that would tide the Donner party over until the slow-moving mule teams could come up. Overcome with delight and gratitude he hur-

ried back to the *alcalde's* office and there made an effort to thank that official.

"Matter of business," Alcalde Sinclair said, briefly. "You pay for what you get at the fort—don't worry about that! And by the way, Stanley, your friend Benton wants to see you."

"Benton!" Stanley had forgotten him. "He's not my friend, sir. I don't want to see him if I can avoid it."

"Don't like him, eh? Well, I've been talking to that unhanged scoundrel, Rogers, this morning and he told me enough about Benton to make me want to look into his affairs. From what I've learned I don't blame you for not caring about him. But you had best see him, I think."

Accordingly, as soon as he had eaten a hearty dinner, Stanley went to the hut where Zeb Benton lay. Benton was almost wasted away; Prent Stanley was shocked to see him so thin, so weak, and so deadly pale. Benton, on his part, looked at his old enemy, turned his head away and began to weep, from weakness and emotion. Awkwardly Prent stood beside the bed.

"I'm going out to see if I can reach the party with supplies, Zeb," he said, simply. "You came pretty close to killing them all; God knows how many of them will die yet because of the delays you caused. What have you got to say to me?"

Zeb Benton, his eyes still averted and his fingers picking feebly at the coverlet of his bed, spoke in a whisper.

"I'm penitent, Stanley," he said. "My father died—and he forgave me. I hit him—back there in the mill—almost killed him. Guess I did kill him. He forgave me. I'm a changed man since I heard that, Stanley."

"I hope so, Zeb."

"I am. Alcalde Sinclair was here this morning. I told him to send out everything the Donner party will need—and I'll pay the bill. But that ain't all. As soon as I get well I'm goin' to start makin' up to the folks for what I done—as far as I can I'll make up. I wanted you to know this 'fore you started out."

Prent Stanley was greatly moved, not su much by the man's words, since it was impossible to tell how complete was this conversion or how long it would last, but by his pitifully heroic manner. For the moment he was sincere, penitent, self-convicted. Prent raised the thin skeleton of a hand that lay on the coverlet.

"I'm willing to take your word for it, Zeb," he said, earnestly. "I'll carry the news back to the train and if you keep to this course perhaps they'll all forgive you and let bygones lie. Good-by!"

"Good by, Prent. You saved my life yesterday when you hadn't ought to have—and I made up my mind to take a new start. Good-by, and good luck to you!"

AN HOUR later Prent Stanley, with ten heavily packed mules ahead of him, two Indian guides leading, and at his side Dick Rogers, the outlaw, who had refused to be left behind, turned his back on Sutter's Fort and began pushing rapidly eastward toward the line of mountains that stood between him and that band of emigrants somewhere on their road to the Land of Promise. Three miles away he could see the cloud of dust rising from the emergency supply wagon that had started on the same mission and journey an hour before. Presently this wagon was overtaken and passed, and then the foothills swallowed up the horsemen and they were on their way to the rescue.

It was on the morning of the nineteenth of October that, from the summit of a low pass, Prentiss Stanley looked out to see, in a long and straggling line across the floor of a narrow valley, the crawling wagons of his friends. His return trip had been a tedious, harassed, unvarying grind, marked by the loss of three of his pack mules, with most of their loads. He and his three companions had lived meagerly but their consumption of food had mounted up.

Therefore it was with something less than seven full packs of jerked beef and flour, with a few dainties for possible sick, that he was now advancing. Somewhere behind him was the wagon—somewhere in those treacherous and forbidding mountains, the tops of which were already beginning to gleam frostily with their burdens of snow.

Urging the Indians and Rogers to follow at their best speed, Stanley went forward at a gallop, his mind whirling with mixed emotions. What would he find in that wearied caravan? What familiar faces would be missing? What tales would they have of hardships, perils, losses, delays. What would he learn of Mary Greaves—what reception receive from her?

Quicker now than he had been a few

weeks before to note trivial details at a distance and to deduce news therefrom, Stanley soon saw that the Donner train was in pitiful condition. Its wagons moved slowly, haltingly, with frequent stops. The distance between the first wagon and the last in the caravan told him that inequalities of strength, skill and equipment were beginning to count; that only the stronger and better driven yokes were making steady progress.

Moreover, both the wagons, with their stock and the members of the party he could see, were showing signs of the strain. The oxen moved heavily, with their heads hanging, and they were all pitifully thin. The canvas on the wagons was stained, torn, coming to pieces. The creak and groan of loose wheels and the heavy, lumbering rattle of worn boxings came to him when he was still far away. Even the loose cattle and dogs moved dispiritedly, wearily. The day was raw and cold, and the wind heightened the misery and desolation of the company and the land through which it dragged its slow way.

Half a mile from the train he was met by three men—Captain George Donner, Judge Sonder Greaves, and another. All were emaciated, bronzed, and sudden with weariness. Prent shouted as they approached and rode among them as gaily as he could, for he saw that they needed cheering.

"On to California!" he hailed, warmed with joy at seeing their friendly faces after such a long absence. "I've brought seven pack-loads of jerky and flour, and there's a big wagon on the road behind."

Captain Donner shook his hand cordially. "You have done nobly, Stanley," he said. "We had about given up hope of you, but you are welcome now—you may be sure of that!"

When Stanley asked about the caravan, Captain Donner shook his head. As he did not speak, Judge Greaves, riding close behind Stanley now as they turned their horses' heads toward the train, replied for him.

"We're in bad shape, Stanley. Some sickness—good many cattle dead—the women-folks giving out, and mighty little to eat. But the worst of it all is the tension."

"How do you mean, Judge?"

"We've been so long together on the road that we are tired of one another—hate one another, almost. Few days after you left Jim Reed had words with John Snyder and stabbed him. Reed was put out of train, although he killed Snyder, as I think, in self-defense. The killing has made two factions and quarreling and surly words are to be heard morning, noon, and night. It's just the strain—that's all. Thank God, the end is now in sight!"

It seemed that the old attorney was obstinately determined not to mention the one name Prent Stanley wanted most to hear.

"Mary all right, Judge?" he finally asked, haltingly.

The old man nodded abstractedly.

"Oh, yes; very well," he said, and that was all.

Ten minutes later Prent, urging some trivial excuse, had dashed down the long line, hailing the emigrants cheerily as he rode, and had come to the wagon he knew so well, dragged along by the two black and the two long-horned brindle oxen. Beside the wagon, walking, watching his approach, and smiling happily, was Mary Greaves. She was older, her face was a little drawn, and her eyes were strained, but she was the same Mary to him.

He jumped from his horse. The oxen plowed on, apathetically, but the two stood still, closely held, and whispering, with sobbing voices—suddenly relaxed from the long tension of waiting and anxiety.

Inspirited by the arrival of much needed supplies and by the promise of plentiful provisions when the mule team and its laden wagon should arrive, the party went into camp early that night and a conference of all the members was held. Prent Stanley urged first that they make a winter camp where they were. The big majority of the travelers were instant in their objections to this plan; at all costs they intended to press on, and he did not argue the question.

It was decided to remain in camp for three days to rest the oxen, several yoke having died within a week and the others being totally unfit for mountain travel. It was with hopes high, and all calculations fixed on reaching the valleys of California within two weeks or thereabouts, that the Donner party broke camp on the morning of the twenty-second and started forward.

AT THIS time the party comprised eighty-one persons, twenty-two of them men, including the two Indians from Sutter's Fort, and twelve of them grown women. There were three wagons belonging to the Donners,

two to Judge Greaves, and fourteen others. The live-stock with which they had started was reduced in number almost to the oxen actually yoked to the wagons.

It was now growing bitter cold and the snap of frost and imminent snow was in the air. But California was just beyond those cold and forbidding mountains, the California of their dreams and aspirations. When, for the last time they crossed the Truckee River—the forty-ninth ford in eighty miles—a cheer ran down the straggling line and all eyes were fixed on the approaching grade!

It was the last cheer that party ever gave. Within three days, toiling and struggling up the steep mountain roads—men, women and boys tugging at the wheels, the girls and children driving, and all straining every nerve to move the heavy wagons—two distinct parties had developed. One was made up of the loads drawn by the sturdier and faster oxen, the other of six or seven wagons under the immediate command of Captain Donher. The former division had managed to gain a full day on the others and these latter had, in addition to their own burdens, the effects and families of two or three men who had either lost wagons on the grade or had been dropped by the leading party.

Slight flurries of snow, the incursions of a band of predatory Indians, and the overwhelming anxiety to reach the destination of their travels caused a sort of madness in the party. The strain was becoming too great for altruism; Captain Donner almost alone of all of them remained faithful to the interests of the whole caravan.

His reward was a bitter one. In the first week in November one of his own wagons broke down, almost killing two of his babies who were riding alone on the household goods. Several precious hours were lost in righting the wagon and then it was found that an axle was broken. Captain Donner and his brother, Jacob, took up their axes, trying to cheer their disheartened women-folk by making light of the difficulty, and fell to work to hew out a new axle. The work progressed slowly, for axes were dull and the wood they could find was gnarled and knotty.

In the middle of the task the chisel Jacob Donner was using slipped from his cold fingers and struck the hand of the captain, inflicting a long, deep, and very painful wound. Still Captain Donner kept up his courage, laughing at the injury. But his faithful wife, with an aching heart and eyes overflowing with tears, hastened to the work of bandaging the cut. She knew well what such injury might mean.

Prent Stanley rode into the Donner camp that evening, shortly after the accident, with the most appalling news the weary party had yet received. He came from that division which had pressed on ahead, reporting that its wagons had finally all reached a deserted cabin near a small lake at the very foot of Fremont's Pass in the heart of the Sierras. Some of them had gone on to a point within three miles of the summit of the pass, fighting gathering snow at every step, had come to a turn in the road that was completely obliterated under a heavy blanket of white drifts, and had finally been driven back to the lake by a sudden rise in the wind and the onset of a blizzard.

"Bad news, that, Stanley," Captain Donner said, grimly. "What is proposed by Judge Greaves and the others?"

"Well," Prent said, slowly, "at the first we thought we'd make one more attempt, with all our oxen yoked to two wagons carrying the women and children. We tried it."

"And what happened?"

"The blizzard caught us and drove us down again. We lost six steers, and two or three of the children were almost frozen to death. There was nothing for it but to stay at the lake."

"And they are all there now?" Captain Donner asked, his first depression seizing him.

"All there, Captain. There's no use trying to go on."

"You mean for a time—until the storm abates?" the captain asked, clinging to his last hope.

"Until the spring thaw, Captain," Stanley answered, solemnly.

Prent remained with the Donners and on the folowing morning the desperate band began pushing upward again toward their companions at the lake. In a shallow valley on what is known as Alder Creek, within about ten miles of the leading group of wagons, a howling wind blew up suddenly, sending great black clouds scurrying before it. The snow began to fall, first lightly, then more thickly, then in blinding and cutting blasts. Hastily, almost in panic, the party unyoked their oxen, seized axes and saws, and began a furious race against the blizzard to build shelter for themselves from the first killing breath of the bleak Sierra Nevadas winter.

CHAPTER IX

THE FORLORN HOPE

ON THE morning after Captain George Donner's small train was forced into camp on Alder Creek the snow was four feet deep on the level, and there was no possibility of building cabins. Under the guidance of John Baptiste, a halfbreed Captain Donner had picked up on the way through the States, a temporary hut of poles covered with rugs, robes and skins was hastily constructed, and in this a fire was built. Donner's family was housed here, with one or two women, while a brush lean-to was built for his brother's family and an Indian wigwam for the single men.

Before evening the snow was falling again and thereafter it fell steadily for eight days. At the end of that time such of the men as could be induced to move at all, many of them having given up all hope and sunk into a surly lethargy, went out under Prentiss Stanley's leadership to look for the cattle of the train.

Only five were found, and they were so nearly dead that they were promptly put out of their misery. For the time being their tough and stringy bodies furnished nutriment for the human derelicts in the camp, but soon another storm, worse than anything so far experienced, covered what remained of the bodies and only one of them could be found. Rations were so low that it was plainly only a matter of time before all must starve together, even supposing that enough wood could be found and brought in to keep the fire up and ward off freezing.

Prent Stanley, Captain Donner, and a few others kept up their spirits and tried to encourage their comrades, but it was a heavy task. Even the little children in the party—famished, half-frozen, frightened, at the terror they read in the eyes about them—became imbued with the same spirit of listless despair; the whole camp was a living sepulchre, buried beneath the implacable and eternal snow.

Flagging hope was kept alive in some breasts by the small chance that the wagon party that had left the fort with Prent Stanley might make through to them before death claimed all. From the first Prent had been unable to encourage himself with any such vain expectation, and he had shared his doubts with the leader.

"It stands to reason that the snow is worse on the summits," he said to Captain Donner. "And we must recollect that the men with that wagon are working for wages and wouldn't make the effort to get through that one of us would, with lives of our folks hanging on it."

"No, Stanley," Donner replied, "I have been sure of that. The only chance we have is to get someone out to the fort for help. Organized rescue is all that can save us now. God grant that we can send the message!"

"As soon as the storm breaks and we have a freeze to pack the surface, Captain, we'll get a message out," Stanley said, positively.

"You mean that you will brave those summits and this snow and make a second trip for help?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't I? Would you expect me to sit here and starve with the women and children? You keep up your caurage, Captain. We'll come out of it, someway."

The propitious day broke presently and, with John Baptiste, Prent started up over the mountain to find out how fared the party at the lake and to send word back to the captain and his group. Baptiste was expected back on the following day, but it was a week before he appeared. He brought the news that, with Prent Stanley breaking trail, fourteen of the party had made three attempts to escape, but had been driven back to the lake each time by a renewal of the storm.

"He ees one brav' boy, that Prent!" John cried stoutly. "Two day—three day—maybe mont' go, but he keep try. Some time he goin' trough, you bet. He sav' us, that Prent Stanlee!"

Christmas came and went almost unmarked; New Year's passed; the month of January dragged on, and the little band fought death with puny hands, living on scraps of food, on bones ground and boiled, on leather pounded to a pulp and heated, on field mice, on bark, on anything and everything that their ingenuity suggested as nutritive and that their famished condition made edible. Six of them died and were hastily buried.

The strongest had given up hope and the weakest were barely breathing when, on the nineteenth of February, just four months after Prentiss Stanley had met them in the Nevada Mountains with his welcome relief from Sutter's Fort, three men arrived, dragging themselves painfully through the snow and bringing temporary

relief sent forward to them by Stanley. It was then, for the first time, that they heard of "the forlorn hope."

ON THE sixteenth of December, a party of fifteen had left the lake camp determined to win through to Sutter's Fort or die in the attempt. Prentiss Stanley was the leader of this desperate expedition, and in it were the strongest and most daring of the whole train. At the last moment, quietly but with a final determination, Mary Greaves had taken her place by Stanley's side, a light pack on her back and on her feet snowshoes made for her by one of the Sutter Indians.

"I am going with you, Prent," she said.

Her father, greatly weakened by sacrifice of his own share of food to save others, but still keeping up heart better than most of the rest of the lake party, raised himself from the bunk on which he lay.

"Mary," he cried, "are you out of your head?"

"No, Father," Mary Greaves answered. "I am stronger than most of the men because I have saved my strength. The time has come for me to be of some use and I am going with this forlorn hope for help."

The old judge swung his feet from the bunk and sat up.

"Forlorn hope, eh?" he inquired, quizically. "I beg your pardon, daughter, for doubting your sanity. You are the sanest one of us all—our hope here is idle! the hope of this rescue party is forlorn, but it is something. I will go with you."

They did not try to deter him, but bade him God-speed with the rest. So was born the forlorn hope and so it started heroically westward to face the unknown.

Among the fifteen in the party was Rogers, the reformed renegade. Each wore hastily constructed snowshoes, each carried a staff, and each had on his back a quilt or blanket and meager rations estimated to be sufficient for six days of travel. It was their hope that they would be able, in that length of time, to over-pass the summit and get into some of the valleys where Prentiss Stanley had seen traces of deer and bear on his previous journey. There were two rifles, with a plentiful supply of powder and shot, a flint and steel and a strong hand-ax; and that was all, save their courage and desperate determination. Two of the weaker men gave out that day and made their way back to the lake. The thirteen pressed doggedly on.

By Stanley's direction Salvador, one of the Fort Indians, led the train. In the middle he placed Rogers and the second Indian, and he himself brought up the rear. Mary he placed fifth in the line, but she would not hear of this arrangement and, brooking no opposition, she dropped back with her lover. Thus, through the second day, they managed to keep the party intact, although the space between the members lengthened imperceptibly but surely until the line was a mile or more long. They made their second night camp under a rock almost at the first summit, but it was two hours before Prent and Mary came in with the last of the stragglers, one of them partly delirious and dangerous.

On the third day the start was made in good order, but as the day wore on all formation was lost and each of the wretched crowd came to the necessity of looking out for himself and forgetting that he had comrades. Prent Stanley, performing prodigious feats in encouraging, supporting and dragging up the weak who fell by the wayside, began to feel terrible pains in his head. At four o'clock, with the short winter day failing rapidly, he clapped his hands to his eyes, dropping his staff and loosing his hold on one of the helpless ones beside him, and cried out in agony.

"Mary!" he sobbed, wracked by torture. "Mary—I'm blind!"

She stumbled to his side and he leaned against her, panting with pain.

"Blind?" she echoed. "Snow-blind, Prent?"

"Snow-blind. Let me sit down here—and you go on."

She threw a weak arm around his shoulders.

"Go on, Prent?" she said, touching his cold cheek lightly with her lips. "Would you go on if I were blind? No, steady yourself against me—so. Now, forward, march!"

They were forced to leave the man Stanley had been helping, and the weakling heroically bade them good-by, promising to get to camp somehow.

Wearily, then, and very slowly, they moved forward, a foot at a time. The pain from his eyes Prent found almost unbearable, but he contrived to control himself after that first outbreak. Nevertheless this struggle against pain increased

the tax on his strength and at times he sank down, too weak to go on. Mary stayed by him—patient, hopeful, helpful and strong with such a strength as love alone can give a woman's frame.

At nine o'clock that night, almost exhausted, the two made camp and dropped in their tracks. A kindly drowsiness put an end to their sufferings for the time. Hastily covered by the others, and warmed by sleeping—as the whole group did—closely together, they awoke in the morning strengthened and refreshed. The derelict they had abandoned on the way, reached camp sometime in the night, crawling on all fours, and he, too, found renewed strength in heavy sleep.

Three days passed thus, the number of stragglers increasing, the supply of food becoming completely exhausted, and their progress becoming a pitiful eight or nine miles each day. On the following morning Stanley, who had used hot lotions alternating with snow packs on his throbbing eyes, awoke to find that he could see a little. Thereafter, miraculously enough, his snow-blindness passed gradually away.

The day was a terrible ordeal. One by one they dropped down, unable to go farther and less and less inclined to try. That night, kept together by the sheer obstinacy and tenacity of Judge Greaves, Mary and Stanley, the others mutinied and refused to attempt another step. Two or three were delirious and one insane and very violent. Judge Greaves and Stanley held a consultation.

"I think there is a sheltered valley on ahead a few miles, Judge," Prent said. "If you'll stay here and keep the party together I'll go on and see if I can get meat."

"Get it—and then come back?" the old man asked, feebly. "You would be a fool to retrace your steps to save any of these lives here."

Prent tried to laugh, but his effort was a failure.

"I'll come back," he said.

He dragged himself up before dawnlight, took his gun, and started away. Someone touched his arm and haltingly fell into step with him. He looked around and saw Mary.

"Go to sleep again, dear, if you can," he said. "Good-by. I'll be back tonight."

"I'm going with you."

"No. It's foolhardy."

"Don't talk, Prent. Both of us need all our strength. I'm going."

And she went. With painful effort they staggered up the steep mountainside, slipping, sliding, falling, sinking into soft drifts and hitching themselves inch by inch across stretches glazed with treacherous ice. Long ago their snowshoes had been abandoned; now their shoes were torn and their half-frozen feet were cracked and bleeding. With a great effort Prent managed to tie the sleeve of his coat about Mary's feet and she was able to move more surely.

After hours of this struggle they passed the summit and dropped down into the valley for which Prent was searching. There was no sign of game. Leaving Mary in a snowbank, half unconscious but warmed by the heat of her own body insulated in the snow, Prent made a painful detour through a small clump of trees, only the tops of which were visible above the drifts of snow. At three o'clock he came back empty-handed and the two lay down together to die.

But the spark of life persisted. Toward six o'clock Judge Greaves, two of the Indians, and two men with their wives straggled into this cheerless camp. The Indians managed to gather branches and build a fire, then fell exhausted, worn out with their puny efforts. No others were expected; this seemed the end. But the others came—all but one, the weakling Mary and Prent had left on the trail the first day, but who had kept valiantly on until now.

In the night another snow storm set in, driven mercilessly before a tornado of wind. The fire was almost instantly scattered and extinguished, but most of them were too weak to know this, or care. Stanley and one or two others, driven by their sense of responsibility to the rest, fought the storm a while in the black darkness. They gathered a few limbs and, with the most titanic effort of will, persisted with flint and steel until a new fire was kindled. Then they dropped down again.

The tree above them caught fire and its blazing branches dropped among them. Yet they were too weak to move, and lay there, one or two receiving terrible burns. The end was near. Human frame and flesh and spirit could not stand such hardship longer. They breathed with pain, lived with agony, cried aloud with the anguish of cold and hunger—yet they saw another dawn.

Prent Stanley was one of the first to waken—rather the first to summon back some measure of consciousness out of the

black welter of weakness and pain. For some minutes he lay limply, trying to gather his wits. His eyes were on a huge rock outcrop ten or twelve rods to the north; he wondered if that rock were a dull grayish blue or whether his tortured eyes were giving him a false impression.

The blurred image that had once been an item of knowledge in his mind cleared.

"Rogers! Rogers! The cache!" he cried out loudly, half crazed with joy.

Rogers was sleeping heavily a few yards away. He sat up, rubbing his eyes and shaking with cold.

"What's that?" he demanded, in a hoarse voice. "What's wrong?"

Prent Stanley was crawling toward him, all his energy concentrated now for the supreme effort. He clutched the arm of the hardened old sinner he had saved from death once before.

"Look!" he sobbed, pointing. "The blue rock! The cache of liquor is up there. Come on, man; we'll save them yet!"

Together, laughing, sobbing, stumbling, falling, dragging up again, tearing fingers and knees on the rocks, but making sure progress upward, they came to the cave where lay spirits enough to revive the party lying helpless below.

Chapter X

California

IN THE annals of the Donner party that camp under the blue rock is known as the "Camp of Death." For four of the forlorn hope the finding of the cached liquor came too late. Two more died in the next day's pitiful, dragging march, but the rest achieved the hopeless; they performed the impossible—they kept on. On the evening of the thirtieth of December they saw a green and level plain miles away and the vision raised their courage and warmed their cold hearts. How many of them could hold out? Could any of them hold out? With sunken eyes and trembling lips they faced each other, questioning and hoping.

Of the forlorn hope, starting with desperate courage from the lake camp on the sixteenth of December, with scant provisions for six days, and with fifteen in the party, seven, on the tenth of January, crawled out within sight of human habitation and fell there, unable to go farther. For hours they lay, too weak to speak, too far gone to rejoice, and too hopeless to expect salvation, even now. But the very proximity of relief fanned dying flames in some.

Prentiss Stanley, stooping to kiss the blue lips of Mary Greaves and choking over her courageous attempt at a smile, rose at last, with one William Eddy, and the two dragged onward. Eddy was one of the heroes of the whole expedition—his name should be as immortal as the names of other saviours of men in history. It was he who finally reached the door of Colonel E. M. Richey's house, some thirty-five miles from Sutter's Fort.

Quickly the news spread around the valley and a relief party was organized. When the kindly Californians returned, bringing in the six survivors, Colonel Richey declared that he and his men had retraced Mr. Eddy's track six miles by the blood from his feet!

There remained now a desperate task—to carry back to the marooned Donner party supplies for their salvation and men to bring them out. Prent Stanley, young and strong, was one of the first to recover sufficiently to enable him to hasten on to Sutter's Fort for help. Almost the first thing he learned was that the wagon Captain Sutter had dispatched with him had been forced back and that another rescue party had pushed through the snows into the heart of the mountains but had returned, baffled, worn out, and stoutly maintaining that no human beings could survive in such straits, quite apart from getting either in or out through the drifts.

The sight of the pitiful handful that had disproved these assertions by breaking through to Richey's fired the brave hearts of the valley lands to renewed effort, however, and soon another rescue party, headed by Prentiss Stanley, was on its way. Mary Greaves was left at Colonel Richey's.

With twelve men, all well mounted, and with ten extra animals, the party left Sutter's Fort at daybreak. By forced marches they made the mountains, and when well into the snow established a supply camp, sent most of the horses back to the valley and started pushing on, leaving two men to tend camp. For Prentiss Stanley, scarcely recovered from the terrors and strain of the journey of the forlorn hope, this expedition was like living over a frightful dream.

He had much to think about as he went forward, for there was no breath for talking and the men with him were hardy and

silent giants little given to conversation on the trail. Stanley thought much of Mary, and of his new life in the West, but also there kept coming continually to his mind the name of Zebulon Benton. The ne'er-do-well, appeared to have been given a new birth by the trials and terrors of his Western journey. Perhaps those trials had refined him, as by fire, Stanley thought. In any event it was now established that, from his patrimony, Benton had paid all the cost of outfitting the expedition that returned with Prent Stanley in October.

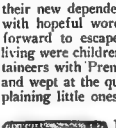
Now, however, Zeb Benton seemed to have disappeared. Judge Greaves surmised that the young man, having paid, as he thought, some small measure of his debt to the ill-fated Donner party by outfitting the supply train that Stanley had taken out, had shipped around the Horn and gone back to enjoy the fruits of his father's activities in Springfield.

Prent Stanley could not believe this last. Something about Zeb Benton had impressed Stanley strongly at the time of their last short interview; it seemed to Prent that Benton was reborn, a different man. The change might have seemed too abrupt and complete to many; Stanley, who knew what the tribulations of mountain travel, heat, thirst, cold, starvation, and loneliness could do, was not to be astonished by any miracle of transformation. He believed that Zeb would be heard from again living a man's life and filling a man's place somewhere in this rugged new country.

Stanley was not far wrong. While he and his men were pushing back toward the stranded wagon train, the story of the Donner party was being told in the new seaport of San Francisco, and there Zeb Benton heard it. At midnight of that day a party of fifteen with Zebulon Benton as their guide, left San Francisco by river boat to go to Sutter's Fort and from there set out for the relief of the storm-bound Donner party.

Stanley's party pressed on, doggedly fighting storm and cold and weariness. It was the nineteenth of February before they reached the lake camp. They found fourteen of the original company missing and the remainder too haggard, gaunt and hideous for Prent to recognize individual faces. Their puling voices rose in one piteous cry: "Give us food! We are starving!"

Hastily such food as they could take into stomachs long accustomed to nothing but the tough, strong fibers of hides, chewed by weakening jaws into stringy masses and washed down with snow-water, was prepared and given to them, in small portions. The rescuers shared clothing with their new dependents, tried to cheer them with hopeful words, and bade them look forward to escape at last. Most of the living were children—and the strong mountaineers with Prentiss Stanley broke down and wept at the questions of these uncomplaining little ones.



THE huts in which they had camped all these dark and weary and hopeless months were mere dirty holes surrounded by great snow drifts from ten to forty feet in depth. For months not one of the party had had strength to raise himself out of the caves except to struggle forth to drag in such wood as their feebleness would permit them to search out. Indescribable were the scenes—unbelievable the conditions!

At once after his arrival at the lake camp Prentiss Stanley took two other men and pressed on to find the Donners, ten miles eastward at Alder Creek. Here conditions were, if anything, more pitiable. Captain Donner was dying. Mrs. Donner was extremely weak, but in good health and able, if she would make the attempt, to reach the settlements. The children were thin, drawn, and pitiful, but such of them as had been able to survive the awful experiences of the winter in those buried cabins or huts were now strong enough to brave the perils of the long journey out.

The terror of this camp was that in it practically all of the emigrants were of the same blood, and to them each tragic death had been a blow and a torture. They were forced to count off each victim of the dread cold and the agonizing hunger one by one, and to bury them in shallow graves in the snow and then to go back and watch the others sinking, able to do nothing any way. Nothing but pray and hope and fight despair and death—and then to die!

Prentiss Stanley tried at once to induce Mrs. Donner to make the journey out with him, promising to do his best to get her and her three children to the land of safety if she would go. Not one step from the side of her dying husband would she take. Finally she was left there, because she would have it no other way, and the children were taken and eventually were saved.

George Donner died and when his heroic

wife, fighting her way to the lake camp afterward, attempted to get on through to find her children she was driven back by a fearful storm. There she, too, gave up her life in the bleak Sierras.

Back over the trail, meantime, Prentiss Stanley was fighting with a party of five rescuers and fourteen survivors. Safely they climbed the long eastern slope; painfully they made and passed the summit; hopefully, but with dragging feet and weakening frames, they started down the western slope—still safely. In another week they would have been past all danger; would have been well on their way into the valley, with its warmer days and its nights of blessed surcease from all pain and cold and weariness.

In another week—but the pitiless chance that seemed dogging the Donner party stepped in again, and in the middle of February there fell on them the worst snowstorm of that worst of many years. There, almost within sight of the land of safety and comfort and shelter and food, rescuers and rescued together faced death once more.

For nine days the party lay huddled there under the lee of a drift, too hopeless to struggle. The spot came to be known as Starved Camp; in it nine died and all were so emaciated and ill that rescue seemed useless to them. On the tenth day they heard the astonished and horrified cries of men. Those of them who could raise their eyes looked up to see a strong and well-outfitted rescue party bearing down on them. Prentiss Stanley was unconscious, most of the others were too despairing to care what became of them.

The rescue party, which had been organized in San Francisco, was led by Zeb Benton and two strong guides. They lifted the children first and started back to the settlements with them, leaving a man in care of the rest, with all the food they could spare and some thick blankets.

Nine days later they returned, with Zeb Benton still in the lead. Prentiss Stanley was feverish; the others thought him dying. The long struggle had been too much for him. For more than five months he had been fighting snow and hunger, straining every nerve and muscle against the Sierras, pitting his own strength and skill against death, and now, in the end, death seemed a certain victor.

"Pshaw, Prent," Zeb Benton said, gripping his former enemy's hand, "you ain't licked yet. Take a good holt on yourself and I'll get you out safe."

Prent Stanley rocked his head with a painful effort.

"Can't make it—Zeb. Take—the others."

"I'm a-goin' to take you!" Benton cried, positively—and he did.

With his one-time rival on his back he started. The other rescuers told him he could not travel thus weighted; it was a man's task to keep his own footing in the deep snow and a tax on a healthy heart to withstand the rigors of the climate and the strain of the altitudes. Several who had essayed to carry children out had been compelled to abandon the attempts.

"Ye can't make it, Mr. Benton," a mountaineer said, finally. "It's agin natur'. Ef the man cain't walk we'll have to leave him here till spring an' send a wagon for him then."

Zeb Benton laughed shortly.

"That'd be about two months too late, friend," he exclaimed.

They saw him leave, bent almost double, but striding along sturdily, strengthened by a moral courage he had never had in him before.

To tell the story of that painful journey would be to write an epic of heroic trial and struggle—how Zeb Benton strove; how he slipped and fell, crouching on hands and knees until he could get breath and strength for another effort; how his tortured lungs began to bleed; how his boots wore to tatters and fell from his lacerated feet; how he zigzagged up precipitous slopes and hitched down ice-crusted canyons; how Prent Stanley, growing weaker instead of stronger, begged and implored to be set down and abandoned that one of them might live; how Benton finally made the last long ascent above the valley and began painfully working down in the end.

Within less than a mile of the first habitations in the valley, an Indian village four miles from Richey's, Zeb Benton collapsed and rolled on the ground, carrying Prent Stanley with him. The shock brought Stanley out of his semi-conscious condition and he turned his face toward the gaunt and haggard features of the man who had saved him.

"Can't you make it—alone, Zeb?" he asked, with a great effort to raise himself.

Zeb Benton smiled.

"No, Prent," he gasped, the words coming in coughing gasps. "I'm done for. Somebody'll find you. I'm—glad!"

"But that isn't right, Zeb! After what you've done——"

"What I've done!" Benton was seized

with a paroxysm of pain and for a moment could not go on. Then he added: "What I've done! I've paid—you—up—a little, Prent."

Prent tried to speak, but the words would not come. He took Zeb's hand, pressed it in his weak grasp, and lay there—himself almost as helpless as the dying man who had saved him.

CHAPTER XI

ROSES IN SPRING

DO YOU smell the roses, Prent?"

"Yes. I've been thinking of them; there were so many times when I thought I should never smell roses again."

"When they found you out there with Zeb and brought you in to me, I—I could not believe it was possible for you to live!"

"But I did live, Mary—thanks to Zeb and you."

The two were in the garden of a hospitable home near Sutter's Fort, a little more than two months after Stanley's rescue. He had been found by the Indians and brought, dying, as it was believed, to Colonel Richey's. For weeks he had lain between this world and the next and only Mary Greaves knew how narrow had been the margin by which he had returned to her from the Valley of Shadows.

Now, idling, resting, and building up on kindness, nourishing food, and the tenderest of nursing, he was rapidly regaining health. But never again would he lead heroic bands either toward safety or to rescue work; never again would he be the strong and straight and agile figure he had been when the Donner party left Illinois. His right leg, frost-bitten repeatedly and finally frozen on the long journey in with Zeb Benton, had been amputated to save his life. For some days after he had come to himself he almost wished to die rather than attempt to face the world so handicapped.

Most bitter of all to him was the feeling he had that he owed it to Mary Greaves to let her go rather than tie her to his own maimed self. As the two sat there in the warm California sun, surrounded by comfort, by singing birds, by blooming flowers and all the sounds and sights and odors of the spring, the duty he felt so strongly laid upon him returned to his mind.

"Mary," he began haltingly, "I've been thinking a good deal about the future since I've been lying about, and I've made a decision that concerns you."

"Well, thoughtful man," she prompted, roguishly.

"I don't want to offer you anything but the best, dear. I want you to be happy and contented and cared for very tenderly; after what you have suffered nothing less will do for you. But I can't measure up to your needs and deserts."

The girl stared at him, her color coming and going.

"Why, Prent Stanley!" she cried. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that now, with my—my leg gone——"

She sprang up quickly and laid her fingers firmly on his lips.

"If you say another word like that, Prentiss Stanley, I'll send for Captain Sutter and have him put you in irons with that Mexican murderer down at the fort!"

"But, Mary——"

"Not another word. Silence! And, besides, here's company."

The "company" proved to be Judge Greaves. The old man was still erect, precise, carefully dressed, and nice in his manners, but his gray hair had turned snow white—snow white in one night after he received news of the death of the two Donners on Alder Creek. He came down the walk toward the young people, glancing about the garden with his superior and distant air, and bowing to his daughter and her lover in courtly fashion, sweeping the ground with the brim of his wide black hat.

"*Buenos dias, señorita y señor!*" he ejaculated.

"Bonus, what?" his daughter demanded. "Land's sakes, Father, have you taken up with heathen customs already?"

"'When in Rome do as the Romans do,' my child. You forget that I am one of the leading merchants of the half-Mexican city of San Francisco."

Mary turned to Stanley.

"Leading merchants!" she laughed. "You should see the little shanty on Montgomery Street that is his mercantile palace!"

"I don't think Prent will be ashamed of it," the judge said. "And I'm anxious for you to get him well, Mary, so that he can come down and take his place beside me."

"Beside you, Judge!" Prent exclaimed. "But how can I, with one leg—and no money?"

"Sho'!" the judge interrupted, forcefully. "See here, my boy!"

He pulled a bill-book from his pocket and from that took a large, crude card, set up by one of the first printers in the West. Prent examined the legend with a lump in his throat, his surprise rendering him speechless for the moment.

GREAVES and STANLEY
Merchants
SAN FRANCISCO
Outfitters of trappers and travellers
States goods at fair prices

Prent Stanley was puzzled.

"I cannot understand," he said, simply. "I have no money and it will be weeks before I can be of any assistance in the store. Surely you are not serious about making me a partner, Judge!"

"I never was more serious in my life, Stanley. You've certainly earned a place with my enterprise and you must have it. Were it not for you we should all be lying out in the Sierras. Without money consideration you are my full partner. Moreover, when you speak of having no money you speak without full knowledge."

Both the young people looked at him wonderingly. Mary touched Stanley's arm and spoke for him.

"What do you mean, Father?"

The old judge cleared his throat, fully enjoying the little scene that he had carefully rehearsed several times on his way up the river from San Francisco the day before. Now he drew out a wallet containing several papers and, with these in his hand, spoke slowly and impressively.

"Prent and Mary, we can never know how far our little kindnesses, our generosity shown to others, may reach, nor what bring back to us. The news I bear has just come to me. I have carefully investigated all the facts in the case and find that they are correctly set forth in these papers, that the papers themselves are entirely legal and in proper form, and that the conditions on which they were premised have been fully attended to. These documents were prepared in San Fancisco and in Springfield by two attorneys, in correspondence."

Mary fidgetted, fretting to know the climax. Prent Stanley sat quietly, only half comprehending.

"Do they have to do with my—with money for me, Judge?"

The old man nodded.

"Money and property—rather extensive property in fact. To be brief, the entire property and wealth of a man who was far more wealthy than any of us knew: Amos Benton, of Sangamon County."

"Benton?" Prent Stanley gasped.

"Left by Zeb Benton, Father?" Mary cried, with a woman's quick penetration to essentials.

"Yes, my dear. Everything the old miller left to his son that son has left to you. Er-r, I forgot to add—jointly!"

"Jointly?" Prent repeated.

Prent looked dumbly to Mary to speak for him, but Mary's eyes were filled with tears. She could only reach out her hand and take the white, thin fingers of Prentiss Stanley, and smile at him with brimming eyes. Seeing that his message had come with proper dramatic effect, the old Judge, chuckling a little to himself, rose quietly and strode away.

Those were calm, peaceful, restful, strength-giving days for both Prent and Mary. Their troubles, terrors and tribulations lay behind them; before them, as bright as the California sun that blessed and warmed them, stretched the promise of years to come. The new West was rising slowly about them; they felt the electric enthusiasm of her builders; they saw clearly what her future might be; and they pledged themselves, wordlessly but none the less solemnly, to a worthy share in the proper shaping of that future.

With their weaknesses, their pettiness, and their selfishness, whatever of those qualities they may have had, burned away by the horrors of the long fight with snow, hunger and horror unspeakable, they stood on the threshold of a new era, keen for the parts in which Opportunity, the great stage-director, had cast them.

"California is to be a member of the Union soon," Prent said, one evening shortly before they were to leave to join Mary's father in the home he had prepared for them in San Francisco. "This is a new country with wonderful possibilities. Already I am impatient to begin my work, to take my place with the others who are laying the foundations of this empire!"

Mary drew closer to him and together they looked out westward to where, beyond the hills of the bay district, the great golden sun was setting in glory. The evening air was balmy, but bracing—there was something in it that made one long to fight for this new land, to struggle with it, to shape and build it aright!

THE TRADING POST

THE OLD FRONTIERSMAN

WE'LL let the old frontiersman who opens this number of THE FRONTIER be the first to have his say in the Trading Post also—for he is an old frontiersman, or at least the son of one. Ralph Barclay Barney comes to the pages of THE FRONTIER with a background of pioneering experience gained at first hand.

Of his Colorado-homesteader and frontier doctor grandfather he recalls:

> Many old-timers still remember him clattering by on horseback in the night, his white beard and his saddle-bags flapping in the wind, in a wild race with the stork, to be on hand at some poor homesteader's cabin upon the arrival of the new settler.

His mother was a Western school-teacher, his father a plainsman, miner, cavalry officer, and rancher. Of himself he says:

> It is sufficient to say that I was born at Longmont, Colorado, in the West, live in the West, and I expect, God willing, to die in the West. From the Mississippi to the Colorado, from the Columbia to the Rio Grande, is my backyard, and, while I have played outside of it once in a while, it never grows old, nor am I ever lonesome so long as I can see snow-covered peaks, pines, or sage.
>
> At various places in New Mexico, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, I have listened to these quiet, soft-spoken men who knew the old frontier; to none of whom, apparently, had come great wealth, fame, nor honor, but to all of whom had been vouchsafed the greatest privilege that in my opinion can be given to any man—the privilege of having helped, each in his own way, in the development of the best land beneath the sun or stars.
>
> It is a composite, sympathetic portrayal of these gray old men of a passing type that I have attempted in my verse "The Old Frontiersman Speaks." Allow me to call the verse a tribute to these men, the frontiersmen, who made our West of today possible, taking little, asking little, except the privilege of living their lives as they saw fit beneath the blue domed sky of the great empire they carved from the wilderness—our own West!

SHIPS AND SLAVES AND WHALES

AN experience quite different from Mr. Barney's is that of James K. Waterman, author of "The Sea Fox," which appears in this number. Nevertheless Mr. Waterman's life has been spent following a frontier no less romantic and even more wide than that of the Old Frontiersman. Indeed it well justifies his claim to stand as an authority on slaving, whaling, and sailing ships. Boston-born, the lure of the sea early made itself felt, so that:

> At the age of sixteen I shipped on a New Bedford whaler for a voyage which, after a season taking the humpback whale on the West Coast of Africa, was to be continued in the South Atlantic, Indian Ocean, and South Seas in search of the sperm whale. After completing that voyage, which lasted nearly four years I joined the merchant service where I was employed until three years ago. Not steadily, though, for at intervals I have been beachcombing on the West Coast of South Africa; mate of a South Sea trader; banging around the East Coast of Africa from Zanzibar to Delagoa Bay and later around Durban. Then I joined a pretty little bark trading at the Seychelles, Madagascar, and two of the Macasarene Islands, Mauritius and Reunion, all in the Indian Ocean. And at one time I spent nearly two years in newspaper work in Cape Town and Durg, South Africa.
>
> Yes, I really do know my Africa and though she has left her mark on me, the lure of her cruel beauty still haunts me almost constantly.

From the above it would seem that Mr. Waterman certainly knows his Africa.

Slavery is, of course, an institution we are well rid of, but certainly all those who engaged in the slave-trade were not heartless and conscienceless ruffians. Nor were the slavers the only guilty parties. The bit of history which Mr. Waterman gives here

is especially interesting in these days of prohibition:

Of all the states in the Union the one which reared the highest and disputed the loudest against the slave trade was my own Massachusetts. At the same time her people were shedding tears by the bucketsful over this horrid speculation in human flesh they kept their distilleries running overtime turning out innumerable hogsheads of rum for the Guinea trade, a liquor for which the natives of that section had acquired a devastating thirst.

In the year 1856 one million gallons left the port of Boston, a greater part of which was intended to solace our colored brethren of the West Coast. Some idea of the extent of our trade with that part of Africa may be gained from the fact that between 1832 and 1864 there arrived from there, in Salem alone, 558 vessels.

Some of the proceeds from the sale of this liquor went to bolster the Abolitionist party—that is, to help free slaves who had been placed in captivity through the agency of this same rum. For "Prime Old Medford" with a dash of laudanum in it was the stock-in-trade of the slavers.

Here is a case in point, one of many: the brig *Neptune* of Salem disposed of several barrels of rum to the King of Bonny. The king and his chiefs immediately began to celebrate, holding a prolonged chop-day, as such revels are called. It ended in the king getting out his war canoes and paddling up the river to declare war on some inland towns. He subjugated three and, leaving them in flames, returned to Bonny, after an absence of four days, and bringing as captives 1,200 men, women, and children, many of the latter at the breast.

To do the *Neptune* justice, these slaves were not intended for her, she being engaged in legitimate trade.

Although he faced no easy task in creating a slaver hero, Mr. Waterman has made old Cap'n Pepper such a likeable old fellow that he compels our respect, his questionable vocation notwithstanding. To give the Cap'n's side of the case, the author gives this little glimpse of Africa—a homeland from which, perhaps, kidnapping was not so bad after all:

Here is a glimpse of what many of the slaves shipped by the Sea Fox and his brother-slavers were really leaving. These poor creatures had been captured far up in the interior by the coast natives, who regarded them gastronomically as the "meat that talks." If they were not sold to the slavers the chances were nine out of ten that they would be eaten.

One Portuguese captain bought thirty slaves that were pulled out of the river before his eyes. They had been soaking up to the neck for two days, as their captors believed this method made them more tender and imparted a certain delicacy to the flesh. Another slaver bought four that were being hawked alive through the village. Whatever part of the body was designated by the purchaser was marked with colored clay until the whole of him was sold, when he would have been promptly dispatched and divided, each buyer getting his choice.

I don't know why the slaves in question shouldn't be pleased at escaping this fate. Personally I would have swum through a lagoon full of sharks and gladly made the middle passage—the trip over the Atlantic—on a hen-coop rather than have taken chances with those filed-tooth cannibals.

Two more of Cap'n Pepper's adventures are coming to you in later stories—one in the next issue—and we hope for a good many more after that.

THE CAJANS

A LITTLE known and very interesting people are the Cajans, encountered by Captain Dale and his emigrants in "Red Sticks," Anthony M. Rud's story in this number. Descended from the Acadians immortalized in Longfellow's poem "Evangeline," these Cajans have clung steadfastly to their isolation. In the piney woods of Alabama, the gulf bayou country of Louisiana and in parts of Georgia, some ten thousand of them are to be found. Little known by the other whites of these sections, shunning contact with others than their own, they have retained a country which today presents a very real frontier within the United States.

These Cajans have a code of honor all their own, and one which is worthy of emulation. Their word is as good as a bank-note and a written contract with them is unnecessary. They give their word and carry out their part of the agreement and expect the other party to do the same.

Recently official attention has been turned to the great need for schools in the Cajan country, and a movement is now under way to give them and their children a chance for education. To quote Gov. W. W. Brandon, of Alabama:

These people are native-born Alabamians. It is the duty of Alabama to do something for them besides collect taxes from them. They are entitled to all of the help we can give them. It is a work we should and we must do. It is a subject which I think the good women of the state should consider. With these native-born Alabamians in our borders who have never been given an opportunity of complete citizenship with all that name implies, I think it time we were up and doing.

WHERE IS THE LAST FRONTIER?

HERE is a correspondent who believes he has found it in South America—and his facts do much to substantiate his claim. A frontier it certainly is; but perhaps you know of another?

Editor, THE FRONTIER,

DEAR SIR:

I possess the southernmost SHORT STORIES on earth, a magazine I had with me on Fireland (Tierra del Fuego) a thousand miles nearer the South Pole than Capetown.

Have you ever read about the real bad men of

South America? Last year a band of nearly three thousand burned over six hundred haciendas. The governments of the Argentine and Chili were obliged to call out troops to disband this gang. Argentina even sent a gunboat up the Santa Cruz River to shell their stronghold.

Here is the only frontier remaining anywhere today. Practically inaccessible mountains and pampas stretching thousands of miles. Do you know that the Argentine runs more cattle, has more sheep than the United States and Canada combined?

Right at this moment a band of outlaws is operating within ten miles of Santiago, and fifty mounted police after six weeks of chase have not been able to catch or break up the band of Flaco Manuel. More than twenty-five murders and hold-ups are credited to this gang.

The country population has woven a regular romance about this gang, comparing Flaco Manuel—Thin Manuel— with Jesse James or Fra Diavolo.

Do you know that Bolivia is the only country where grows the cocoa leaf from which cocain, and so forth, are extracted? I believe that ninety per cent. of all illegal "dope" is smuggled into the United States from the Pacific coast of South America.

Hasta luego,
Chas. O. Picky.
1642 Diez de Julio,
Santiago, Chile.

GOOD OLD-TIME STUFF

MANY are the fine letters we have been receiving, letters which make real suggestions for the planning of THE FRONTIER. Particularly do our correspondents seem to favor the story with a background of history, stories in which the great historical frontier characters play a part. This good letter is typical:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear sir:

I'm an old *Short Stories* reader, and am very much interested in your new magazine. Best of luck to you! Hope to see some bang-up stories such as have made *Short Stories* famous.

Stories written around Wild Bill, Pawnee Bill, Buffalo Bill, Kit Carson, Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Custer, and a score of those chaps who made history in the early days, would appeal to many readers. Some good old-fashioned Indian stories would ring the bell; stories of our old-time pirates. Wouldn't some of these fit into THE FRONTIER? Couldn't you give us a few old-time stories like this?

I know the above is a big order—but Dunn, Sabin, and a few others could do it.

'Nuf sed. Good luck—and make THE FRONTIER a winner!

Sincerely,
Francis W. Cameron,
25 West 42nd St.,
New York, N. Y.

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir,

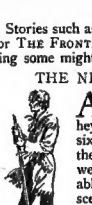
I think the first number of FRONTIER a mighty fine piece of work; from all points of view and can see, from the promise it gives, that you will have a giant in this publication within a short time.

I really think, if I have a suggestion to make that you should do a story occasionally around a pioneer mother. The pioneer woman has never been played up by writers and without her we never would have gone as far and as fast. She was more resolute than history records.

Sincerely,
Clem Yore.

Stories such as these certainly are in line for THE FRONTIER, and we are now planning some mighty good ones for you.

THE NEXT FRONTIER



ARIZONA when the cattle country was in its heyday, when the law of the six-gun decided matters in the far places where the weak Territorial law was unable to reach—that is the scene of "The Valley of Strife," the complete book-length novel in our December number. The valley ranchers were gradually crushing out the owner of the Swinging J when Clive Morgan chanced along—and after him a horde of ex-Rangers from Texas. Marshall R. Hall has packed this novel chock full of concentrated action from start to finish—action and mighty interesting characters too. It will be some time before you forget Clive Morgan, Two-Gun Farrell, Blaze Ormsby, and all the rest of that Ranger outfit.

"The Vanishing Spoor" by L. Patrick Greene, is a long novelette laid on the frontier of Rhodesia. A fine story—and, of course, Greene's usual fine picture of Africa. The other novelette of the issue will be "The Trail of Doom," by Eugene Cunningham, a story of the Crabb Expedition into Sonora, that filibustering party which set out to add Sonora to the Union.

Among the short story contributors will be James K. Waterman, with another tale of the Sea Fox; Robert Terry Shannon, with a story of the desert and of gold; Albert William Stone, with a Western story in which the Law of the Range is invoked once more; Oscar Schisgall, with a tale of the Amazon jungle and one who braves it alone; Barry Scobee, with a homesteading tale that comes mighty close to the heart-strings.

In "Pioneers, O Pioneers!" Michael Williams, who gave us that good article on the Alamo in the first issue of THE FRONTIER, has another fine article on the Pattie Expedition, that hardy band of Kentucky hunters who went overland to Sante Fe, California, and even to the Pacific, the first Americans to make the overland trip.

They Fought to the Finish With Odds Against Them *Until--!*

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Sprawn of the Desert. By W. C. Tuttle. He prayed for the soul of a murdered man—then trimmed the gamblers at their own shell game.

Lure of Piper's Glen. By I. B. Hendrix. Jim Todhunter of the sledge-hammer fists set a dizzy pace, until—

Apache Valley. By Arthur Chapman. Cattle rustlers, night holdups, a yellow sheriff.

Second Mate. By H. Bedford-Jones. Mutiny in the China Seas; ship's scuppers running red.

Loaded Dice. By E. L. Sabin. How bold American Adventurers drove the Spaniards out of Texas.

Arizona Argonauts. By H. Bedford-Jones. Ships-a-reckin men "driftin' wild." Mysterious Chinaman with a beautiful white daughter.

Devil's Paydav. By W. C. Tuttle. Hard-dying heroes who defy both nature and men. Burning sands—buzzards in the spring.

Canyon of Green Death. By F. R. Buckley. Creepy, strange, this mystery of the lost barranca. Terrible conflict in the desert. Duty versus desire.

Sky-High Corral. By Ralph Cummins. Tale of a "rest ranger who refused to lay down." Neither five, feud nor jealous scheming can whip a regular he-man.

Sontag of Sundown. By W. C. Tuttle. Where bravery and bullets count. Rough cow-punchers—quick to greet a friend or choke a traitor.

Challenge of the North. By I. B. Hendrix. "Bad" men and true. Nerve that balks at nothing.

Don Quichotte of the Rio Grande. By Stephen Chalmers. A big man who was lookin' for trouble—and found it.

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"Just because I wear cowboy clothes and ride and shoot like a man," said Wildcat Nell, "I guess there's a lot of talk about me going around, but from now on I help dad in this feud, and you can take that home to the boys at Keystone Ranch." And Wildcat Nell swung her heavy rawhide lash across the ranchman's shoulders. He could feel the blood rush into the welt where the stinging lash had cut through his shirt. Wildcat Nell—! but read the rest for yourself in "Apache Valley," one of the many daring stories in these twelve big bully books. A thrill on every page.

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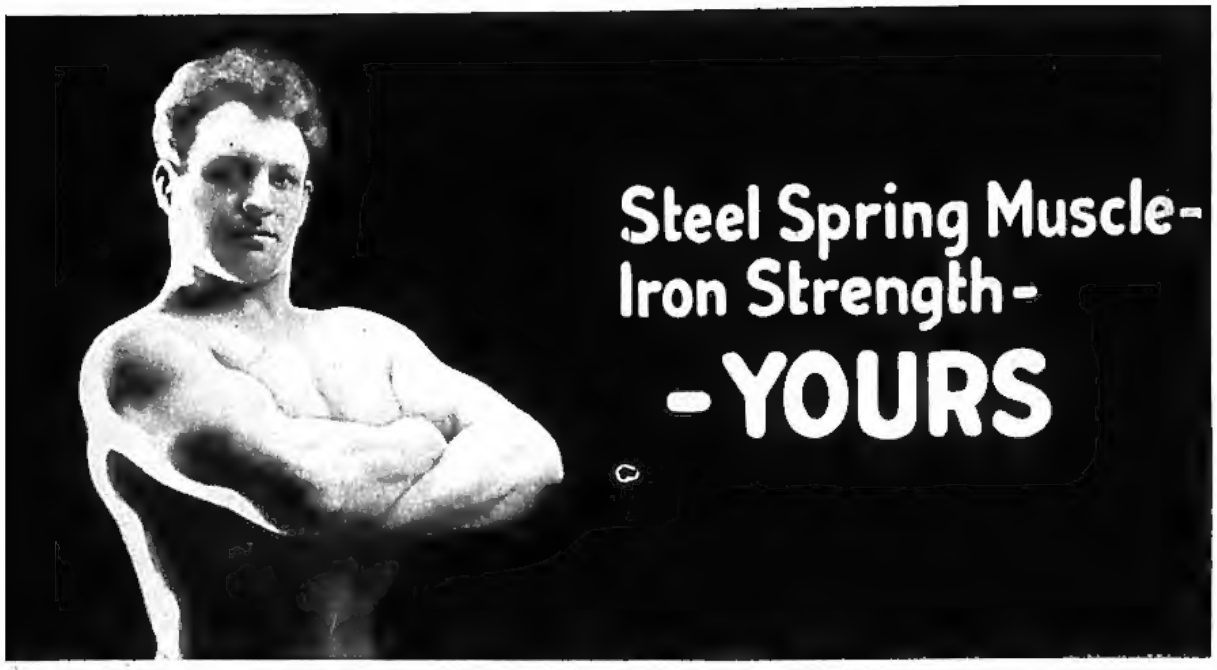
Steel Spring Muscle-
Iron Strength-
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This new way of building strength and muscle is the most astonishing, the simplest and the most successful method I know!

The strongest man living at last divulges the method that enabled him to acquire strength. This new method now brings the real promise of health, strength and power to even scrawny weaklings. And the simplicity of it will amaze you!

Andrew Passannant himself one of the world's strongest men—prize winner in contests of strength—student of physical culture—tells how he was astonished at Breitbart's method—and how it surpasses previous methods.

Never before has such news been released in the world of physical training!

I have known of Breitbart for years. But I never before realized what a superb physical specimen he is. His feats of strength are astounding—unequalled! He drives nails through oak planks with his fists. He bends silver dollars between thumb and finger. He sustains more weight or lifts more than any living man. He bends steel bands around his arm like so much ribbon. *And as a young man he was a puny weakling.* For years Breitbart has kept his method secret. "Anyone who knows my method can do what I can," he says. But now he wants the world of men, hungry for strength, to know. He has made his fortune and he is satisfied. So now, gladly, he has divulged his secret—he makes known the simplest strength-building method ever devised. Yet it is the most positive, quickest and successful of all known systems.

What Is This New Method?

I have been a student of physical culture for years. I know the methods of every physical culture expert of any prominence in the country. They are all much alike. But here is a different, better method. Here is a system of strength and muscle building unlike anything I have ever seen. It has enabled Breitbart to become a superman. It has put inches on my own muscle. It has built rugged strength and power into even slightly built fellows who never had an idea they could become "strong men." There is no one so puny or weak whom Breitbart cannot help.

Breitbart Offers You Strength!

Are you one of those puny, undersized, white livered fellows who is satisfied to live a second-rate existence—or are you red-blooded and full of pep and vitality? Are you satisfied with scrawny, "baby" arms and legs—do you want muscle, strength and power? If you have a man's heart in you, are you satisfied with your physique?

Then wake up, come to life and get what Breitbart offers you!

Breitbart's method is unique, because it builds strength and muscle too. What is the Breitbart secret that is now made known for the first time? Here at last is a method that not only gives you big, bulging arms, shoulders and legs—muscles you'll be proud of—but strength as well. There are many ways of developing the size of your arms, but they fail to give you real strength. But the Breitbart way gives you the rugged muscular power to lift, to bend, to break, to crush and it makes every fibre count. So that as your muscles grow big your strength grows in proportion.

Send for Breitbart's Book Just Off the Press!

A 64 page booklet showing startling feats of strength by Breitbart—the Superman of the Ages, unparalleled in the world's recent history. This book will give you a real thrill of inspiration—just to look at its wonderful illustrations—to read its thrilling descriptions—will give you the call to power. It shows his pupils—it describes his methods—published now for the first time. Breitbart asks you to send only a dime to cover the cost of mailing and publishing.

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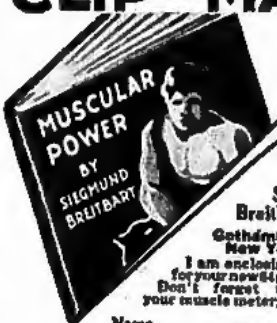

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